

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Module 1: The Old Testament

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# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part I – The Kingdom of God

### Key Questions:

- What is the purpose of the Universe? What is mankind's purpose – why are we here?
- Is there a God, and if so, can we know what God is like?

## Introduction – Terminology and Worldviews

### *Christianity*

Christianity is a system of belief that makes certain claims about the nature of truth. It is an all-encompassing system that impacts the individual's beliefs about this life and the after-life. Worldwide, there are more people who would identify Christianity as their religion than any other.

### *Christian*

A Christian means literally someone who follows Christ (Jesus). There are many people who call themselves "Christian" simply because they are born in a country or into a family with a Christian heritage, but this does not really make them a Christian. To be a true Christian implies a personal response to the claims of Jesus.

### *Bible*

The Bible is the book that the Christian faith is based on. It is not actually one book, but a collection of 66 books written by over 40 different writers over a period of 1500 years in three different languages and in various locations. These books are historically accurate records. Although these books are very different in style and content, they add together to make one story. Christians believe that the Bible is God's word (that it contains His truth) and that it is the only authority for us to follow.

### *Jesus Christ*

Jesus Christ (Jesus is a personal name; Christ is a title meaning "God's chosen one") was born in modern-day Israel (at that time it was part of the Roman Empire) in around 4 BC and died near Jerusalem around 33 AD. He was a great teacher, and it is reported that he performed many miracles, especially healings. His teachings attracted a popular following, but were opposed by some of the ruling elite of the Jewish people. They plotted Jesus' death, and persuaded the Roman governor to execute him by crucifixion (being nailed to a wooden cross). His followers claimed that He returned to life within three days of his death, and despite great opposition they spread the message about Jesus across the Roman Empire and later across the world.

### *Church*

A local church is literally a group of Christians who are committed to meeting together in one place. The word is also often used by people (although never in the Bible) to describe buildings where Christians meet.

### **View of the World:**

1. **Atheism** (e.g. Marxism)  
There is no God
2. **Agnosticism** (e.g. Confucianism)  
We cannot know whether or not there is a God
3. **Pantheism** (e.g. some eastern religions)  
"God" is not separate from the Universe, but is an impersonal force in everything
4. **Polytheism** (e.g. Hinduism)  
There are many gods who have power in certain places or areas of life
5. **Deism**  
God is personal, and separate from the Universe. He created the Universe and set it in action, but He does not intervene in the created world and cannot be known personally
6. **Monotheism**  
There is one personal God who created the Universe, but He intervenes in the world in miraculous ways and can be known in a personal way by human beings.

### **View of self:**

We are purely physical, results of evolution, limited to this lifetime

We should just get on with life in this world as we can't know what lies beyond

We are spiritual as well as physical – we need to get in touch with "god in us" or in tune with the Universe

We are spiritual and must coexist with the gods or spirits. We should do what is necessary to keep them at peace.

We are spiritual and should worship God, but this is an impersonal experience. The spiritual and physical are different areas of life – religion and science are parallel

We are spiritual and physical, and we can experience God in a personal way. God's truth is absolute and should direct how we live our lives (physical and spiritual)

Christianity is Monotheistic. It teaches that God is personal and can be known – in fact He is always revealing Himself to human beings (see Page O.12 for a summary of the ways in which God speaks to mankind). The Bible is the story of God's

relationship with human beings. Because Christians believe in one creator God, they also believe that truth is absolute (rather than relative) – that there are some truths about life and the Universe that are true for all people everywhere at all times. The purpose of these studies is to examine the claims of Christianity by studying the Bible. Then we will be “truly educated”, and will be able to make our own decision about the claims of Christianity

## Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 – God and Man

The Bible is really the story of God and man, and to understand its message we need to realise what God is really like. The very first verse in the Bible begins with the words, “*In the beginning God ...*”. The Bible does not try to prove that God exists – rather it opens with a statement that He does exist. The first two chapters of the first book (Genesis) tell us what God is like and how He intended the Universe to operate. One key verse in Genesis 1:27 says, “*God created man in His own image*” – in other words man has a quality that is different from any other animal God created which enables him to know and worship God. There are similarities between God and man, but also important differences:

GOD	HUMAN BEINGS
Is eternal, invisible separate from the universe <i>"In the beginning God..."</i> (Genesis 1:1)	Are physical, limited to time and part of the universe <i>"the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground"</i> (Genesis 2:7)
Is the creator <i>"... created the heavens and the earth ..."</i> (Genesis 1:1)	Are consumers (use what God has made) <i>"... they will be yours for food"</i> (Gen 1:29)
Is personal and rational <i>"God saw all that He had made, and it was very good"</i> (Genesis 1:31)	Are personal and rational <i>"The man gave names to all the livestock"</i> (Genesis 2:20)
Exists in relationships in community <i>"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'"</i> (Genesis 1:26)	Are made for relationships and community <i>"It is not good for the man to be alone"</i> (Genesis 2:18)
Is the life-giver <i>"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men"</i> (John 1v4)	Are living beings <i>"God ... breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"</i> (Genesis 2:7)
Is king over all <i>"The LORD reigns. Your throne was established long ago; You are from all eternity"</i> (Psalm 93:1&2)	Are the stewards of the king over the earth <i>"... let them rule ... over all the earth"</i> (Genesis 1:26)
Blesses and gives to man <i>"God blessed them"</i> (Genesis 1:28)	Are created innocent in relation to God <i>"The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame"</i> (Genesis 2:25)

## God's plan (the theme of the Bible)

The Universe as God created it was a place of order and harmony – **God looked at it and said it was perfect** (Genesis 1:31). There was no suffering or death in the Universe. Man knew his place within this system, and there was perfect harmony in every area of his life:

### 1. Harmony with God as His King – innocence before God in obedience to His commands

God gave four commands to the man and woman. Three were positive:

- Multiply (Genesis 1:28)
- Subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28)
- Eat every seed bearing plant (Genesis 1:29)

Only one was a command **not** to do something:

- Do NOT eat from the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (Genesis 2:17)

### 2. Harmony with one another – the husband and wife together

- Man and woman were designed to be a team together in doing God's work (Genesis 2:23)
- Marriage was planned for God as the basis for human society (Genesis 2:24)
- The man and woman had perfect innocence with each other (Genesis 2:25)

### 3. Harmony with the universe – man ruling over nature with the “mandate of heaven”

- Eating the fruit of the Tree of Life – therefore living forever
- Ruling over the fish, birds and land animals (Genesis 1:28)
- Appreciating nature for pleasure and food (Genesis 2:9)

So, human beings were created to live with great freedom, but within the limits of obedience to God as their King. God gave the first humans great freedom with many privileges and choices, but He gave them one rule that did not permit them to eat the fruit of one tree. This rule was intended for their good, but it also gave them a choice whether or not to obey God as King. God has created human beings with the ability to choose to follow Him or to reject Him. The plan of God is to have a group of people who would obey His rule and live in the place He provided for them. This is what is known as the **Kingdom of God**, and can be summarised in one simple sentence:

**God's people (harmony with one another) living in God's place (harmony with the universe) under God's rule (harmony with God) enjoying God's blessings**

### Key Lesson: God founded His Kingdom through Creation

God is a spiritual personal being who created the Universe. He created mankind to know and love Him. God's Kingdom means God's people living in God's place under God's rule enjoying God's blessings.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 2 – The Harmony Broken

### Key Questions:

- How did God's perfect Universe come to be so imperfect? Why do human beings suffer and die?
- Why do so many people have no knowledge of God?

### Satan – Temptation and Deception (Genesis 3:1-6)

The **snake** who tempted the woman (Eve) was actually Satan – the enemy of God. The Bible does not clearly tell us about Satan's origin or how he became evil, but it is absolutely clear that only God is eternal and all powerful. Satan, therefore, was created by God, and, although he has power to influence human beings he cannot ultimately defeat God. Satan always wants to destroy what is good and keep people from trusting in and obeying God, and he does this in two major ways:

#### a) Deception – influencing people to believe thoughts or ideas that are not true

Satan used a clever trick to deceive Eve – he questioned what God had said (verse 1). Notice that when Eve replied to him she actually misquoted God (verse 3) because God never said that they could not *touch* the tree. Next, Satan directly denied what God had said, telling Eve that if they ate the fruit, rather than dying, they would become like God (verses 4-5). Satan was distorting Eve's view of God, by making Him seem like a selfish person who was limiting their power and His laws (which were intended to protect man) as something bad. Satan was challenging the authority of God as King and encouraging human beings to reject Him and become their own rulers in opposition to God.

#### b) Temptation – influencing people to do wrong by making the wrong choice seem attractive

In verse 6 we see three ways that the fruit appealed to the woman. These three things are still major sources of temptation for people today:

- **It was good for food** – although they had plenty of fruits they could eat, the woman thought this one would also be good to eat – perhaps even better than any of the others. This is an example of a good desire (hunger) gone wrong. God has given us many good desires that help us live good lives, but we need to control these desires, otherwise we will use them in selfish ways without considering the needs of others. Each of these desires can lead to harm (sin) if they are not controlled.
- **It looked nice** – often temptation appeals strongly to our eyes or one of our other senses. When we dwell on something wrong that we see or hear instead of turning away from it, we often become weaker to resist. We convince ourselves that we have the right to do what we want anyway (“if it seems good, it must be OK”), and that we are strong enough to cope with doing it, even though other people may not be.
- **The fruit would give them wisdom** – often we think that we will receive good results if we do something, even though it might be wrong. We convince ourselves that our lives will become fuller, happier, or more complete.

### Sin – rejection of God (Genesis 3:6)

Eve obeyed the snake, and Adam obeyed her. The decision they made was to disobey what God had said and make themselves king in God's place. **They believed the lie that they could become their own gods, living life by their own choices instead of by obedience to God's laws.** Effectively what they said was, “I don't need God to be the King of my life, I can make my own decision and be my own King”. The Bible uses a very simple word to describe this rejection of God and rebellion against Him – **SIN**. Man wanted to have complete control over his own life, but he did not have the power to do it! This is the same choice every human being has made since Adam and Eve. In fact, the Bible tells us that we have inherited the principle of sin in our lives, and the result is that we do wrong things.

### The results of Sin (Genesis 3:7-23)

As a result of eating from the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, the man and woman now had an understanding of what is evil as well as what is good. In this sense they had become like God (v22). They could not, however, have God's unlimited power and wisdom, so they were unable to cope with this new understanding. Sin makes people slaves – it traps them so that they are powerless to avoid doing wrong. Sin had immediate results for the man and woman:

#### Harmony with one another broken – innocence changes to dishonesty and distrust

*At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. (verse 7)*

They had to clothe themselves as they were no longer innocent. This was an attempt to cover themselves and hide the shame they felt. They were no longer innocent before each other. There was also a loss of honesty and trust in their relationship as the man blamed the woman for giving him the fruit to eat.

#### Harmony with God broken – trust changes to fear and shame

*I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked. (verse 10)*

In verse 7 we see the first occasion of shame in a human being. Human beings from all cultures experience the sense of having failed when they are aware of doing wrong. In Western culture we normally interpret this as guilt (the feeling of having broken a law) and in many Eastern cultures it is more often thought of as shame (having failed to live up to the expectations of our family or community). When God came to the Garden Adam and Eve tried to hide from Him because they were afraid of Him, rather than trusting Him. Instead of admitting their guilt and shame and their need of him, they tried to pass the blame – from the man to the woman and from the woman to the snake. Sin had destroyed their relationship with God. Ultimately, God acted in judgement to prevent man making another wrong choice and eating from

the tree of life. The man and woman were banished from the presence of God and from the Garden He had made for them. We can describe this separation from God, the life-giver, as spiritual death.

### Harmony with the Universe broken – God’s Curse on all Creation

Because of man’s disobedience God placed a curse on the entire creation. This had specific consequences for the snake, the woman and the man. Life would no longer be free of pain and trouble in the world. There would be pain in ordinary processes of life – for the woman in childbirth (verse 16) and for the man in the process of work (verses 17-19). Because of the loss of harmony with the Universe there are natural disasters and diseases, and the ultimate result of man’s sin was death. This is what verse 19b means when it says “*dust you are and to dust you will return*”. Because they could no longer eat from the *Tree of Life*, the man and woman could no longer live forever (verse 22).

## Sin passes to all men (Romans 1:18-32)

In the New Testament book of Romans we discover that the sinful nature, which leads us to sin, has been inherited by every one of us, and, because we sin just as Adam and Eve did, sins results (spiritual and physical death) come to all of us:

*Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned* (Romans 5:12).

Over many generations sin affected mankind and human cultures. Romans 1:18-32 describes this process in two stages:

### 1. The knowledge of God was replaced (verses 18-25) – WRONG WORSHIP

Over the generations instead of recognising the Creator and passing on the knowledge they had about God to their children people deliberately rejected God, and so later generations knew less and less about God. God has made human beings to worship Him, and when we reject Him other things take His place. People began to worship the moon, sun and stars, or to make idols that look like animals or human beings. They created gods in their own image instead of worshipping the true creator God. This also led to a great fear of evil spirits, who were often worshipped as gods or sacrificed to as a way of keeping them happy. Some philosophies try to free human beings from this guilt and need for religion, but they cannot solve the real problem of the human heart either. We need to know the true God!

### 2. Society became increasingly sinful (verses 26-32) – WRONG ACTIONS

Because they rejected Him, God allowed human beings to follow their wrong desires, and the result is a list of sins that hurt other people. The wrong behaviour we see in our world is actually a result of our rejection of God.

## God’s love and a promise!

The news is not all bad. In this chapter we also see evidence of God’s continued love for mankind. God’s judgement of Adam and Eve in refusing to allow them to stay in the Garden (verse 22), was also a demonstration of His love. He knew it would not be good for mankind to live forever with sin and its results, so He put them away from the *Tree of Life*. Death, as well as being a judgement for sin, would actually allow them the opportunity to have a new life the way God intended it to be. There are also two other signs of God’s love in this chapter:

- a) **The clothes of animal skin (verse 21)** – this is the first death of an animal in the Bible, and God is the One who kills it. He does this to make a covering for their shame. This is a picture of **sacrifice**, an important concept in the Bible which we will return to in the next study.
- b) **The promised rescuer (verse 15)** – God gave a promise when He was speaking to the snake that one day a descendant of the woman would crush the head of the snake, although his own heel would be bitten. This refers to a person who will come to solve the problem of sin and destroy the work of Satan. It is the first of many promises in the Old Testament about a person chosen by God to rescue mankind. These promises are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

## Two Ways to Live (Genesis Chapter 4)

Genesis Chapter 4 shows how sin passed to Adam’s first sons, Cain and Abel. It revealed itself in Cain in two ways:

1. **Wrong Worship** – the real problem for Cain was a struggle in his heart – whether to do what was right or to give in to sin (verse 7). Cain disobeyed God in the offering he brought to Him. It is not clear whether this was because he brought the wrong type of offering (fruits instead of an animal) or because his attitude was wrong. Whichever it was, he thought he could choose his own way to worship God rather than the way God had given.
2. **Wrong Actions (murder)** – Cain’s murder of his brother shows just how powerful sin had become in the heart of man even one generation after Adam. Sin traps us and controls us, preventing us from doing what is right.

Cain and Abel represent two ways to live life:

### a) Cain – *The way of disobedience*

Cain gave in to sin and made his own choices about how to live. He allowed his instincts to rule him (leading him to murder his brother), and refused to worship God in the way that God expected. Cain chose to ignore what he knew about God and to be his own king. This is ***the way of disobedience*** – rejecting God.

### b) Abel – *The way of faith*

Abel obeyed God and worshipped Him in the way that God expected. Although he also had inherited sin from his parents, he trusted in God to save him. This is ***the way of faith*** (see what the New Testament says about Abel in Hebrews 11:4). Faith means recognising God as King, seeking to obey what He says rather than depending on our own ability to guide our own lives, and depending on Him to save us.

As we read through the Bible we will see that there have always been people who lived both of these two ways. Both Cain and Abel had sin, but they made very different choices about how to live because they had different attitudes to God.

### Key Lesson: God’s Kingdom was destroyed through man’s sin (rebellion against God)

All human beings are born with sin. Sin separates us from God, leads to wrong worship and wrong actions, and eventually causes death. There are two ways to live: disobedience (rejecting God) and faith (seeking God).

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 3 – Judgement and Grace, Sacrifice and Covenant

### Key Questions:

- Will God ever stop the suffering that is in the world? Will He judge those who do wrong?
- Is there any hope for the world to get better? Can God's Kingdom be rebuilt?

### The story moves on (Genesis Chapter 5)

Genesis Chapter 5 tells about the descendants of Adam through his third son, Seth. It lists the names of eleven generations of Adam's family, starting with him and ending with three sons of Noah. There is a good reason why the story focuses in only on Seth's descendants and why the list finishes with Noah's children. **The Bible does not try or claim to tell the whole history of mankind in all detail, but is intended to teach us about how God has been working through history to bring people into His Kingdom.** The life-spans of these men are extraordinarily long by modern standards (from 777 to 969 years), but this prolonged life can be explained by considering the following facts:

- **The human gene pool was more pure**, with less mutations (mutations began after Adam sinned)
- **There were less people alive**, so there was less competition for land and a better standard of living
- **There were probably less infectious diseases** – these have increased over time, and later became the major cause of death until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when modern hygiene and medicines reduced infections significantly
- **God had not yet imposed a shorter limit on man's life** – in Genesis 6:3 God imposes a limit of 120 years on the age of mankind (this limit works through a genetically programmed process of ageing). This maximum age limit was true throughout the Bible from that time forward, and remains true today in the record books!

One man, Enoch (verses 21-23), stands out in this list of men – he did not die, but was taken out of the world by God because he had a close relationship with God. It seems that most people in these days did not have a good relationship with God. Enoch is mentioned especially because he was an exception. He lived by the way of faith.

### God's Judgement and Grace (Genesis Chapter 6)

In Genesis Chapter 6 the story focuses in on Noah. Verse 1 describes rapid population growth, and in verse 3 God limits the human life-span to 120 years. As mankind grew more numerous, their sin became greater, and they grew further and further away from God. This brought pain to God's heart, and in verse 7 He decides to judge mankind for their sin. Judgement is a very important principle in the Bible. Sin has consequences, and God will not leave sin un-judged. It is His right to judge mankind, as He is the Creator, and His judgement is based on truth since He alone sees all things – including man's thoughts and motives (verse 5).

Verses 1 to 7 paint a very dark picture of the world, full of sin and far from God. But in verse 8 we see that one man, Noah, was different – he found "favour" with the Lord. God's favour is also known as **grace** – it is undeserved by any person, because all have sinned. In verse 9 we learn that Noah was living by faith and not in disobedience:

**1. He was "righteous" & had a good reputation**

**RIGHT ACTIONS**

This means that he did what was right, and his actions towards others were consistent with his heart

**2. He "consistently followed God's will"**

**RIGHT WORSHIP**

Like Enoch, his great-grandfather (see Genesis 5:22), Noah obeyed God's will and knew him

So, the way of faith is shown in worship of God (trust that His will is best) **and** right actions towards other people.

In contrast to Noah, the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence (verse 11). This is a powerful contrast between the two ways to live:

	Way of faith	Way of disobedience
<b>People</b>	Abel, Enoch, Noah	Society as a whole
<b>Attitude to God</b>	Walking with Him – obeying & worshipping Him	Corrupt – disobeying Him & worshipping other things
<b>Actions</b>	Righteous & blameless	Violence

God decided to judge the earth through a great flood, and so told Noah to prepare a great boat. In verse 18, God said that He would make His "covenant" with Noah by saving him in the boat. He gave orders that would ensure that every kind of living creature would be saved (verses 19-21). Noah obeyed God (verse 22). Obedience is the evidence of true faith. Throughout this Bible we can see these themes of God's judgement and grace. He will judge sin, but He also wants to rescue people because of His grace. However, **God's grace can only be received by people through faith in Him.**

### The Great Flood (Genesis 7:1-8:1-14)

The Flood came, just as God had promised, when Noah was 600 years old (verse 6). It covered the whole earth, and was not a gradual rising of waters, but a very powerful event that changed the face of the earth. Rain fell for 40 days and nights, and the ground broke open so that the water that was under the earth burst up (verses 11-12). This probably included great volcanic activity, with the formation of many of the earth's great mountain ranges and the continents beginning to move apart (perhaps very quickly at first). It may also have triggered climate change, as there seems to have been much more humidity in the air across the earth than there is now (this may also have caused an Ice Age). If you add up all the days in Chapters 7 and 8, we discover that Noah and the others were in the ark (boat) for over a year. All people and creatures that were not in the boat died – only Noah and his family (8 people in total) were saved.

## Sacrifice (Genesis 8:15-9:7)

In Genesis Chapter 4 we learnt that God wanted people to worship Him by offering sacrifices to Him, but that this had to be done in the right way, and most importantly with a right attitude of heart (Abel's sacrifice was accepted, but Cain's was not). The first thing Noah did when he came out of the boat was to sacrifice some animals and birds (8:20). This principle of worshipping God through sacrifice runs through the Old Testament.

A sacrifice was made to give thanks to God and to worship Him. It cost something to the person who was making it, but it also had a deeper meaning. Since death is the punishment of God for sin, when a person sacrificed an animal to God it was a reminder of that person's own sin, as if the animal was dying in that person's place, for his sin. This idea becomes clearer later in the Old Testament, but there is a very important principle here:

**God must punish sin. Sin can only be forgiven on the basis of sacrifice.**

Sacrifices were a picture of true faith in God, and God is not pleased with sacrifices from people whose hearts are not right before Him (see Psalm 51:16-17). However, sacrifices of animals were limited for two reasons:

1. **They could never really pay for sin.** They were only a picture to show that the individual was sorry for his sin and was asking God to forgive him, but an animal life is not equal in value to a human life, and so **we need a better sacrifice to really pay the price for sin.** To be equal in value to a human being this sacrifice must be a person, and to be a sacrifice for another person they must be sinless themselves (not deserving God's judgement).
2. **They had to be repeated many times.** Because the person kept on sinning, they needed to repeatedly make sacrifices to God. **We need a perfect sacrifice that can bring forgiveness for sins once and for all.**

When God saw Noah's sacrifice, He was pleased with it since it came from Noah's heart, and was offered with proper respect for God. God made a promise that He would never again destroy all living creatures in this way. Rather, there would be a normal cycle of days and seasons, which we still see today (verse 22).

## God's Blessings and Covenant (Genesis 9:8-17)

God had saved Noah and his sons from His judgement, and He now gave them new blessings. God gave these remaining human beings a new beginning, giving them the same command to increase in number and fill the earth that Adam was given (9:1 compared to 1:28), although without the hope of subduing the earth and animals as Adam could before he sinned (compare God's words in 9:1 with His words to Adam in Genesis 1:28) – the animals will fear man. God introduced some new freedoms and rules for mankind:

1. **Man can now eat meat** (verses 2-3) – before this time human beings must have been vegetarian
2. **Man must not eat meat with its lifeblood still in it** (verse 4)
3. **Human life is special because we are made in God's image** (verses 5-6). This is not a new principle – it is a re-statement of the principle of creation. Human life is unique on earth, and must be respected and protected.

In Genesis 9:8, God introduced His covenant with Noah. The concept of covenant is very important in the Bible. A covenant is a special relationship between God and a person or group of people based on promises God makes to bless them. It may include a rule or rules that the people must obey to maintain these blessings, and always has a sign to remind God and people of it. Perhaps the best example of a covenant for us is the marriage contract between two people – a relationship based on promises with a sign (a ring). Take a look at the covenant God made in Genesis Chapter 9:

<b>Made with:</b>	Noah, his descendants, and every living creature (verses 9-10)
<b>The promise:</b>	There will never be another flood to destroy the earth (verse 11)
<b>Rule(s):</b>	NONE
<b>The sign:</b>	The rainbow (verses 12-17)

This is the first of three covenants we will learn about as we continue to study the Bible. It is through these covenants that God restores His kingdom with mankind. The covenant with Noah gives hope that God will restore His Kingdom, and as we read verses 1-17 we might even wonder if the kingdom will be restored fully at this time – Noah and his family were God's people living in His place (the earth He had given them) under His rule.

## The Founding of the Nations (Genesis 9:18-11:32)

However, as we read on in Chapter 9 we learn that despite God's covenant, **the problem of sin had not gone away** as Noah's son Ham dishonours his father. Chapter 10 tells how Noah's three sons became the ancestors of all nations, as they fulfilled God's command to multiply. However, sin continued to reign in mankind, and in Chapter 11 we see mankind's sin becoming so great that God had to move to limit man's destructiveness again. The people came together to build a city and tower to celebrate their own greatness. The problem wasn't that they built a city but that this was another action rejecting God as their King! So, God confused the languages of the people causing different groups to speak different languages, and scattered the nations over the earth (11:7-9). Since then there has been distrust and conflict between nations and cultures. This event is significant, because it tells us something very important:

**Man is not able to make this world perfect through his own effort, even if all the nations work together in unity. Because of sin (which shows itself in pride and greed), even the best political ideas will ultimately fail if they do not recognise God as ruler over all.**

Chapter 11 finishes with another line of descendants of one man – this time of Shem. Like the list in Chapter 5 it ends with a man with three sons (verse 26). One of these sons, Abram, will be the next great figure of the Old Testament. We are left wondering how God will restore His Kingdom, and how He will finally deal with the problem of sin, which makes it impossible for people to obey Him. Who could be the perfect sacrifice for sins?

### Key Lesson: There is hope for God's Kingdom to be restored because of His Grace

God is holy and He must judge sin, however, He is also gracious and wants to save and forgive those who have faith in Him. God will restore His Kingdom through Covenant, and will forgive sin on the basis of sacrifice.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 4 – The Old Covenant I - God's People

### Key Questions:

- What is true faith in God like? How can God accept sinful people on the basis of faith?
- If God loves people of all nations, why does most of the Bible focus so much on just one nation?

### Abraham's relationship with God

#### God calls Abram to follow Him (Genesis 11:27-12:9)

Abram was born in Ur, but when he was young his father, Terah, planned to take his family to Canaan. For an unknown reason they stopped half-way, in a place called Haran. The people of Ur worshipped many gods, but Abram's family knew about the true God. God spoke directly to Abram, calling him to leave his home to go to a land He would give him. God made three promises to Abram: to make Abram's name great and make his descendants into a great nation (12:2), to make Abram a blessing to other people (12:3), and to give the land of Canaan to Abram's descendants (12:7a). Abram did exactly what God said and left the town of Haran. His nephew, Lot, went with him. Abram was following the "way of faith", just as Abel and Noah had. He called on God's name and worshipped Him by sacrifice (12:7-8).

#### God accepts Abram because of his faith (Genesis 15:1-21)

The Bible records Abram's story honestly, including his faults. How was God able to work through Abram even though he made many mistakes? The answer is found in verse 6, which is one of the most important verses in the Bible:

*Abram believed God, and He credited it to him as righteousness*

God had already promised that Abram would have many descendants, but this seemed impossible because at this point He still had no children (verse 2)! God again promised that Abram's descendants would be very numerous (verse 5). Because it was God who promised it, Abram believed His words, even though he was already quite old (verse 6). Abram made a sacrifice again to God (verse 10), showing His faith in Him. God told Abram in a dream (verses 13-16) that a time would come when Abram's descendants would be badly treated as slaves in a foreign country for 400 years.

#### Abram and Sarai disobey God – Ishmael is born (Genesis 16)

In chapter 16 we read about a time when Abram acted not in faith but in disobedience to God. Abram's wife, Sarai, did not believe that God would fulfil His promise through her, and so she gave her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to Abram as a partner. Abraham was already 85 years old, and childless. Sarai's plan was that they would build a family through Hagar (verse 2). When Hagar became pregnant it caused great problems between her and Sarai. Hagar despised her mistress, and Sarai blamed Abraham. Abraham refused to intervene, and Sarai mistreated Hagar. Hagar ran away, but God protected her and told her to return to her mistress, promising that Hagar's descendants would be many (verse 10), and giving her a name for her son (verse 11). The problem with Sarai and Abram's action was that they decided that God needed their help to work out His promise to Abram. Instead of trusting God, they tried to fulfil His promise their own way. This was a big mistake, and although God did bless Ishmael, the promise of God could not continue through him.

#### God makes His Covenant with Abram and changes his name (Genesis 17:1-22)

God had already made three promises to Abram on two occasions: that he would have many descendants who would form a great nation (Genesis 12:2; 15:5), that others would be blessed through his descendants (Genesis 12:2; 15:5) and that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:7; 15:7). He now confirmed these promises in a covenant:

<b>Made with:</b>	Abram – whose name was changed to Abraham (verse 5)
<b>The promise:</b>	Many descendants, blessing to other nations & possession of Canaan (verses 6-8)
<b>Rule(s):</b>	His male descendants must be circumcised (verse 10)
<b>The sign:</b>	Circumcision (verse 11)

To mark this covenant relationship, God gave Abram a new name. The change of name was significant: Abram means "exalted father", but Abraham means "father of many". Sarai's name was changed to Sarah.

#### The birth of Isaac and a split in Abraham's family (Genesis 21:1-20)

Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old his son was born to Sarah. They named the child Isaac, which means "he laughs" because they laughed for joy at the birth of a child to such an elderly couple and expected everyone else to laugh too (verse 6). Unfortunately, Sarah became jealous of Hagar and Ishmael after her own son Isaac was born, and she insisted that Abraham should send Hagar and Ishmael away (verses 8-10). This caused a separation between Isaac and Ishmael that continues even to today between their descendants, the Jews and Arabs. God continued to protect Ishmael (verse 20), but he married an Egyptian wife and the descendants of the two sons grew further apart.

#### God tests Abraham's Faith (Genesis 22:1-18)

God asked Abraham to do the unthinkable – to kill Isaac as a sacrifice to Him (verse 2). Would Abraham be prepared to give the most precious thing he had for God? This story teaches us much about Abraham's faith:

1. *Abraham obeyed God* – faith is not just agreement with the mind, but it leads to obedience with the will and actions
2. *Abraham trusted God to save Isaac* – this incident was a test of Abraham's faith (verse 12). Abraham's willingness to give the most precious thing he had to God showed that his faith was true. True faith does not hold anything back from God. In the New Testament (Hebrews 11:17-19) we discover that Abraham was so sure that God would keep His promise to give him descendants through Isaac that he believed that God could raise Isaac back to life.
3. *Sacrifice is necessary* – God provided a ram to die in Isaac's place. This is a reminder to us that God's covenant depends on sacrifice and that we need His forgiveness. The ram is a picture of the perfect sacrifice that was to come.

## Abraham's Descendants (Genesis chapters 24-50)

The remainder of Genesis tells the story of how God protected Abraham's family and began to form a great nation from them. Abraham's family was marked by conflict in every generation and by examples of both disobedience and faith:

**Isaac and Ishmael** – It was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that God continued His covenant relationship with Abraham's descendants. Abraham found Isaac a wife (Rebekah) from his own home country and they continued to live in the land of Canaan. God blessed Isaac greatly (26:12) and he lived at peace with other peoples in Canaan (26:31).

*Ishmael represents the way of disobedience and Isaac represents the way of faith*

**Jacob and Esau** – these were the twin sons of Isaac. Their personalities and interests were very different. Esau was the older twin, but he rejected God by treating his birthright with contempt and marrying wives who had no respect for his parents or for God (26:34-35). He became the ancestor of the nation of Edom, which became an enemy of the nation of Israel. Jacob was a deceiver who tricked Esau out of his birthright (25:27-34) and later out of Isaac's blessings (chapter 27). However, his life was changed through two amazing encounters with God:

- a) *He wrestled with God* (32:22-32) – God began to change this deceiver into a man who would trust in Him. God told Jacob that He would change his name to Israel, which means "God struggles".
- b) *God gave the covenant promises to him* (35:1-15) – God made it clear that Jacob's descendants (the nation of Israel) would carry on the covenant relationship with Him.

*Esau represents the way of disobedience and Jacob represents the way of faith.*

**The twelve sons of Jacob** – Joseph was his father's favourite and his brothers hated him and sold him as a slave. He ended up in Egypt, where through an amazing sequence of events God eventually made him the chief ruler of Egypt under Pharaoh. He was able to use this position to rescue his brothers and their families from a famine in Canaan, and to show them that God is in control (50:20). Jacob's twelve sons became the ancestors of twelve tribes within the nation of Israel.

*Joseph represents the way of faith and his brothers the way of disobedience.*

Genesis ends with Abraham's descendants (now known as the "People of Israel") living in Egypt, not in the land God had promised them (Canaan). God's promises to Abraham were not complete, and His Kingdom had not been established – God had called his own people (the nation of Israel), but they were not in His place under His rule.

## Why did God choose one special nation?

As we read about Abraham with his great faith and the promise of a land for His descendants to live in we may wonder if this would be the way in which God planned to restore His kingdom. The pattern for the Kingdom can be seen in God's people (Abraham's descendants) living in God's place (the land of Canaan) under God's rule enjoying His blessings, but as we read on we will see that God's Kingdom would not finally be restored through the nation of Israel – they were simply preparing the way for Jesus Christ to come. The nation of Israel was chosen by God for three great purposes:

1. **To show other nations God's power and goodness** – so that other nations would recognise Him as the true God. In Exodus 19:6 the nation of Israel is described by God as a "*kingdom of priests*", meaning that they would make God known to the other nations and would bring the other nations to know God.
2. **To receive God's words (His Law and prophecies)** – so that they would be written down and passed on through the generations. In the New Testament (Romans 9:4) we read that: "*They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's special children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave his law to them. They have the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises.*"
3. **To one day produce a Saviour for all nations** – this was the ultimate way in which all nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants. In Romans 9:5, we read that: "*from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ*" (NIV). This was God's ultimate plan to bring in His Kingdom through His special servant – the Messiah (or Christ).

God's special relationship with one nation, Israel, did not mean that He did not love the other peoples of earth. The Bible focuses on one nation because it was through them that God was working out His plan to save people from **all** nations and to bring His Kingdom to fulfilment. The Old Testament includes several stories of how God worked in the lives of people from other nations that show us that He loves all people. **Not all Abraham's descendants would have their sins forgiven – only those who walked, as he did, in the way of faith in God rather than the way of disobedience.**

## God's grace is received through faith on the basis of sacrifice

God did not accept Abraham because of good things that he did (Abraham was sinful just as all human beings are), but because he had faith in God. He listened to God's voice and obeyed, and he trusted God to lead his life. This faith was shown through Abraham's actions: firstly in leaving Haran to go to Canaan and ultimately in offering Isaac. The New Testament describes Abraham as a great person of faith (e.g. Romans chapter 4), and we can define faith based on his life:

**Faith is listening to God's words, trusting that they are true, and acting in obedience to them**

The Bible teaches that God's grace (His favour which is undeserved by us) is shown to all human beings despite our rebellion against Him. His grace means that He wants to forgive us for our sin and to give us the gift of a new relationship with Him and eternal life. However, His grace can only work in our lives when we have faith in Him. To receive a gift from another person you must first let go of the other things you are holding and then take the gift with empty hands. To receive the gift of God's forgiveness and His new life we must first stop holding on to the other things we trust in (for example, our own ability or pride) and admit that God is the King and that we need His help. Then we must trust that He is able to save us. In faith we depend on God to save us. This salvation is only possible on the basis of sacrifice, because sin must be punished through death. The Old Testament system of sacrifice expressed the people's faith in God to save them, but it also pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ who would die for our sin.

### Key Lesson: God chose Abraham to be the founder of His special nation, Israel

God accepted Abraham because of his faith. The nation of Israel was chosen to witness about God to the other nations, to receive God's word and to bring a Saviour for all nations into the world.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 5 – The Old Covenant 2 - God's Rule

### Key Questions:

- How can we know what is right and wrong? How can we recognise what sin is?

### Abraham's descendants in slavery (Exodus chapter 1)

The book of Genesis ends with the nation of Israel living in the land of Egypt. At first they were protected by Abraham's great-grandson Joseph, but after Joseph died the Egyptians began to feel threatened by the growing Israelite population within their country. They were afraid that if the numbers of Israelites grew too large they might take over control of Egypt. The Pharaoh (Egyptian emperor) made the Israelites slaves working in construction (this fulfilled God's words to Abraham in Genesis 15:13). It seemed that God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan could not come true. The Israelites lost hope in God's promises and no longer worshipped Him through sacrifice. Instead of being free to worship God in the land He promised them, they were slaves in a foreign land. They needed to be delivered from slavery and taken to the land of Canaan and to be reminded how to worship God through sacrifice. However, God had not forgotten His promises, and this slavery actually fulfilled His word to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-16).

### Moses – leader of Israel

Moses was one of the greatest leaders the people of Israel ever had. He was born around 1526 BC and lived for 120 years. His life can be divided into three 40 year periods:

#### Growing up as an educated Egyptian – birth to age 40 (Exodus 2:1-10)

- Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the Pharaoh wanted to kill every male Israelite baby
- His mother hid him for three months until he was adopted by a princess and raised in the Egyptian palace
- During this time Moses would have learned the Egyptian language and culture, and useful leadership skills

#### Living in the Desert as a shepherd – aged 40-80 years (Exodus 2:11-25)

- Moses never forgot that he was an Israelite. Aged 40 he murdered an Egyptian who had mistreated an Israelite
- Moses had to run away into the desert to avoid punishment. He lived there for 40 years working as a shepherd
- During this time Moses married and had a family and also learnt how to survive in a desert situation

#### Leading the People of Israel – aged 80-120 years (Exodus 3 – Deuteronomy 34)

- Aged 80, Moses met God, who called him to lead His people (God spoke to him from a burning bush)
- Moses felt inadequate to speak to Pharaoh, but God confirmed His power to Moses by performing miracles
- During this time Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and received the Law of God

### God delivers His people from Slavery

Moses returned to Egypt after meeting God. God delivered his people and restored his covenant with them in stages:

- 1. Faith in God restored (Exodus 4:27-31)** – The Israelites struggled to believe that God was speaking to His people again after 400 years, so God used Moses to perform miracles (extraordinary things that are outside the normal rules of nature). In the Bible, miracles are often called "signs" (see Exodus 1:8-9), because they are intended to show people that God is really at work by making them notice that something special is happening. The Israelites believed Moses when he told them that God had called them because they saw the miraculous signs.
- 2. God's promises restored (Exodus 6:2-8)** – God reminded the Israelites of His promise that He would have a special relationship with them as His people and would live in the land He gave to them. Canaan is described by God as a land of plenty and peace (see Exodus 3:8). It was the promised land of God's presence for His people.
- 3. God shows His power through miracles (Exodus 7-10)** – Pharaoh refused to allow Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. God gave nine powerful signs to show that He was at work, but the Pharaoh still refused to listen. He "hardened his heart" against God.
- 4. Judgement and sacrifice restored (Exodus 11-12)** – Because Pharaoh refused to listen, God gave one last sign, which was also a judgement on Pharaoh and Egypt. He would kill the firstborn son in every family in Egypt. As well as demonstrating His judgement, God also restored the principle of sacrifice as the way for His people to be saved from His judgement. The sacrifice He told the people to observe is called the "Passover" and it became the most important festival for Jewish people and the basis of a new calendar for them (Exodus 12:2). This marked a new beginning for the Israelites, and the Jews still celebrate this feast every year. The sacrifice had to be a lamb with no physical defects (as perfect as possible), and the blood of the lamb had to be sprinkled on the door frame of the house. The family could then eat the lamb's meat together in a special meal. When God judged the Egyptians, He spared the people in all those houses that had blood on the door frame (Exodus 12:12-13).
- 5. God delivers the people through the sea (Exodus 13:17-14:31)** – When Pharaoh saw the great loss of life in Egypt he allowed Moses to lead the Israelites out towards the land of Canaan. Then he changed his mind, and sent his soldiers to chase after them. The Israelites were trapped between mountains on either side with a sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them. God lifted up the water to form a dry pathway for them to walk through, and returned the water on top of the Egyptians when they tried to chase the Israelites. God saved His people in this powerful way, and they remembered it forever after! There could be no doubt that God loved and would care for them.

## The Journey to Canaan (Numbers and Deuteronomy)

After they left Egypt with Moses, the people of Israel spent 40 years crossing the desert before they came to the land of Canaan. The journey should have been much shorter, but because the people who left Egypt refused to trust in God and complained against Him, He made them wander until all the adults who had left Egypt were dead except for two men (Joshua and Caleb) who had remained faithful to Him (see Numbers chapters 13-14). The people thanked God when He did great things for Him but they rejected Him when they were hungry and thirsty. Even Moses was forbidden from entering Canaan because he disobeyed God (Numbers 20). Despite their lack of faith, God kept the people alive in the desert by miraculously providing food for them. He sent them manna (a special kind of bread that they found lying on the ground in the mornings) and quails (a type of bird that fell from the sky) to eat. Moses led the people until he died in around 1406 BC. Before he died he challenged them to remember God's covenant and to obey His Law when they entered the land of Canaan. He said that God would bless them if they remained faithful and would curse them, even by removing them from the land, if they didn't (Deuteronomy 28:1,15,64). The story of these people teaches us something very important about faith:

**true faith trusts and obeys God not only when life is going well, but also when our situation is difficult.**

The New Testament shows us that they really had no real faith in God (Hebrews 3:7-19). A true Christian has surrendered their life to God – they are not just coming to Him to try and get something they want for themselves.

## God gives His Law through Moses

During the 40 years in the desert, God gave many laws to Moses for the people of Israel. These are recorded in the books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Law was given as one body of rules for the nation of Israel. There are over 600 laws that Israel had to keep, but they can roughly be divided into three types based on their purpose:

- 1. Rules about individual behaviour (moral law)** – These laws speak about the relationship of people with God and the relationships between people, showing what actions are right and wrong.
- 2. Rules about how to worship God (ceremonial law)** – These laws (mainly in Leviticus) speak about how various sacrifices should be made, special festival days, the *Tabernacle* (a special tent which represented God's presence with His people and where the sacrifices were made), and the clothing of the priests (see *Module 1 Study Aids*).
- 3. Rules about how to govern the nation (civil law)** – Rules about punishment for crime, treatment of diseases, protection of poor people, widows and slaves, and forbidding the wearing of certain clothes and eating certain foods that would lead to disease or to identification with other religions. These laws were specific to Israel, and although they contain wisdom that modern governments could learn from, the Bible does not expect all nations to follow them.

After Moses passed God's Law to the Israelites they promised to keep every word of it. Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of a sacrifice to mark this amazing occasion (see **Exodus 24:3-8**). This marked the renewal of the covenant God had made with Abraham, bringing a new hope for God's Kingdom to come in the Promised Land. **The heart of the Law was this covenant relationship, and the heart of the covenant relationship was God's love for His people and sacrifice which showed their dependence on Him to forgive their sins.** God's people were now under His rule, but they were not yet in His place. The pattern for the Kingdom of God was not complete yet!

## Three Purposes for God's Law

### 1. To show the people what God is like

The Law reveals God's character to us. Through it we realise that He is:

- a) Holy** – this word means that He is always perfect and always does right, and that He cannot tolerate sin.
- b) Loving** – He wants to live with His people and to be known and worshipped by them. That is why He told them to make the *Tabernacle* to represent His presence with them and to make sacrifices to Him.

### 2. To show the people the best way to live (Exodus 20:1-17)

**The basis of the Law is love.** It was an expression of God's love for His people and their love for Him. Jesus taught that the whole Law could be summarised in two simple principles (Matthew 22:24-40):

- a) Love God with your whole being (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)** – the people were to "*love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" [right worship]
- b) Love others as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18) [right actions]**

The rules contained in the Law were designed to teach the people what it would mean in practice to live out these two principles. The **Ten Commandments**, which are a summary of the Law, contain four rules showing people how to love God and six rules showing them how to love others. God did not give His Law to make life difficult for His people but to show them the best way to live and to protect them from the harmful results of sin. If Israel kept God's Law their society would be just and fair for all people, and would show other nations that God is the true God.

### 3. To teach people that they needed God's forgiveness for their sin (Romans 2:1-3:20)

The Law would keep the people from sin and harm by teaching them what was right and wrong. Before the Law was given people only had their **conscience** (an inner sense of whether a choice or action is right or wrong) to guide them – although this is God-given, because of many generations of sin affecting our lives and human society it is damaged and not fully reliable as a guide to what is right and wrong. The Law is a much more accurate and sensitive guide. This was the ultimate purpose of the Law. When the people compared their actions with the Law they would realise that they fell short of God's standard and that they needed God to forgive them for their sins. No one can fully obey the Law because we have inherited a tendency towards sin from Adam and Eve. The Law also shows us that sin cannot be ignored, and that it can only be forgiven on the basis of a sacrifice. The system of sacrifices was given to teach the people that forgiveness could only be given on the basis of the death of a sacrifice in their place.

### Key Lesson: God gave His Law to the nation of Israel through Moses

God's Law shows us what is right and wrong (more accurately than our conscience) and what God is like. When we compare ourselves with God's Law we realise how sinful we are and how much we need God's forgiveness.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 6 – The Old Covenant 3 - God's Place

### Key Question:

- If we have sinned against God how can we hope to have a good relationship with Him?

### The conquest of the Land of Canaan

[Joshua]

In 1405 BC the people of Israel under Joshua's leadership entered the land of Canaan. God took them through the River Jordan in the same way He took their parents through the sea, by parting the water so that they could walk on dry land. The campaign to conquer Canaan took many years, since the cities of Canaan were difficult to attack and the Canaanites were good soldiers. God gave clear commands to Joshua about how they should fight these wars – they were to destroy the other nations who lived there because these people were very sinful and God wanted to keep the Israelites free from their influence (see Deuteronomy 9:4-5). Unfortunately, the people of Israel did not completely obey these commands, and they left some of their enemies undefeated. These survivors would be a constant source of bad influence over the Israelites – leading them towards sin and idolatry. However, the book of Joshua finishes on a high note:

*the LORD gave to Israel all the land He had sworn to give their ancestors ... All of the good promises that the LORD had given Israel came true (Joshua 21:43, 45)*

As we read these words we might think that God's Kingdom has finally come – **that God's people (Israel) could now live in His place (the land of Canaan) under His rule.**

### The Judges and the decision to have a King

[Judges; I Samuel 1-8; Ruth]

After Joshua died (around 1380 BC) the nation was leaderless, and the people began to forget God and even to worship some of the false gods of the Canaanite peoples. Over the following three centuries Israel entered into a cycle of repeated sin and disobedience. When the Israelites disobeyed God, He allowed the other nations of Canaan to dominate and oppress them. However, each time the people called out to God to save them, God showed His grace by raising up a ruler to defeat their enemies and rescue them. These leaders, who led regions of Israel rather than the whole nation, were called Judges, and they were fascinating people (we read of thirteen of them in the book of Judges). Many of the Judges were not good examples of obedience to God, but God used them despite their faults to rescue His people. The period of the Judges was a mixed time in Israel's history, with many people disobeying God, but others living faithfully for Him (see the book of Ruth).

Eventually the people decided that they wanted to have their own king. They were jealous of the other nations and thought that they would be more successful if they had king who would unite them and give them greater strength. They came to the last Judge, Samuel, and insisted that he should appoint a king over them (I Samuel Chapter 8). Although God had given the Israelites instructions about how to choose a king before they entered Canaan (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20), their request for a king at this time was actually a rejection of Him. They were looking for a king to be the source of their strength instead of trusting in God to be the one who protected them. In reality, their weakness was not because they had no king but because they had disobeyed God. Samuel asked God for His guidance. God told him that the people were actually rejecting Him as their King, and told Samuel to warn them how a king would oppress them by making himself rich on the basis of their hard work. Samuel warned the leaders of Israel, but they still insisted on having a king, and so God told him to anoint a king for them. God's chosen person to be the first King of Israel was Saul, a man from the tribe of Benjamin.

This period of history teaches us an important principle: **God was the true ruler of Israel, and human rulers had to remember Him and lead by listening to Him, obeying His Law and leading the people to worship Him.**

### The United Kingdom

[I & II Samuel, I Kings 1-11, I Chronicles, II Chronicles 1-9]

The first three kings ruled for 40 years each:

1. **Saul (king of Israel 1050-1010 BC)** – Saul was very strong and handsome (I Samuel 9:2). After being anointed by Samuel he started out well as king, but he later disobeyed God because of his pride and his fear of peoples' opinions (I Samuel 13:1-15). God rejected him as king and said that another man would replace him (I Samuel 15:24-29).
2. **David (king of Israel 1010-970 BC)** – David was anointed as king when he was still a young boy working as a shepherd for his father (I Samuel 16), but he soon proved himself to be a great soldier. He demonstrated great faith in God when he killed Goliath, a huge Philistine who had been mocking Israel and God (I Samuel 17). Saul later became jealous of David, and chased him for many years, but David refused to harm Saul even though he had several opportunities to kill him. Eventually, Saul was defeated in battle by the Philistines and committed suicide (I Samuel 31). David was made king over his own tribe of Judah (II Samuel 2) and later succeeded in uniting the whole kingdom under his rule (II Samuel 5). He was a great king and had great faith in God. Although he also made many mistakes, he always returned to God. He is remembered as the greatest king Israel ever had. **God renewed His covenant with Israel through David by promising that the kingship of Israel would belong to David's descendants forever (II Samuel 7:12-16).** David brought peace and prosperity to the nation of Israel by defeating many of their enemies. He also wrote many of the Psalms (songs about human experience and about his relationship with God).
3. **Solomon (king of Israel 970-930 BC)** – Solomon, David's son, became king after his death. God gave him great wisdom, and in his early years he was a great king with immense wealth. He did not have to fight wars because his father had been so successful in war. Solomon's greatest achievement was to build the Temple in Jerusalem. In his wise years Solomon wrote much of the book of Proverbs (a collection of sayings teaching us how to live wisely), and later in his life he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes (a philosophy book showing how meaningless life without God is).

## David - a Man after God's own heart

God described David as a "*man after His own heart*" (see I Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22). David certainly was not perfect – in fact he committed many shocking sins (for example, he committed adultery and arranged for the woman's husband to die in battle so that he would not be discovered – see II Samuel 11). God accepted David because he desired to worship God, to know Him and to serve Him more than anything else in life. David lived by the **way of faith**, and he genuinely repented of his sins and trusted God to forgive Him. We can see David's relationship described in some of the Psalms that he wrote:

### Psalm 139 – David's understanding of God

David knew that God is:

- *All-knowing* (verses 1-6) – He knows all our thoughts, feelings and actions
- *All-present* (verses 7-12) – we cannot escape from His presence or hide from Him
- *The One who created us and has plans for us as individuals* (verses 13-18)

Therefore we should trust in Him and ask Him to search our hearts and show us our sin and His will (verses 19-24).

### Psalm 51 – David's true repentance

This psalm shows David's response when he realised he had sinned (after the events recorded in II Samuel 11):

- *God loves him, but he still needs to have forgiveness (mercy) from Him* (verses 1,2,7,9)
- *All sin is firstly against God and God's way is always right* – sin is in the heart of man; we are born with sin (verses 4-5)
- *He needs a new heart that is pure and intends to change his life based on his repentance* (verses 10-13)
- *Sacrifice is pointless unless the heart is repentant but the only hope for forgiveness is through sacrifice* (verses 16-19)

### Psalm 23 – David's faith in (dependence on) God

David speaks about his close relationship with God. He uses the picture of a shepherd to describe how he depends on God. The LORD: supplies all he needs (verses 1-3a), guides him through life (verse 3b), comforts and protects him in difficult times (verse 4), gives him fulfilment, dignity and victory (verse 5), and can be trusted in this life and after it (verse 6).

### Conclusion:

From David's example we can learn how to begin to have a good relationship with God:

1. **Ask Him to search you and show you His way** (Psalm 139) – this is a good place to begin if you want to know God. Simply ask Him to teach you and to show you His way.
2. **Repent for your sins** (Psalm 51) – to repent means to say sorry from the heart. In repentance we recognise that sin is serious before God and turn away from living our own way to live for God.
3. **Depend on God in faith to lead you, protect you and provide for you** (Psalm 23) – faith means believing God and trusting Him. In faith we surrender control of our life to God and continue to obey Him whatever happens.

## The Temple and the city of Jerusalem

Jerusalem was a stronghold of a tribe called the Jebusites until King David conquered it in around 1003 BC (see II Samuel 5). It became the capital city of the Jewish people, and is often called *Zion* or the *city of David* in the Old Testament. Jerusalem represented the place God's rule over His people, and the prophecies about the Messiah say that He will one day rule from David's throne in Jerusalem (e.g. Isaiah 9:6-7). David had a great vision to replace the Tabernacle with a permanent building in Jerusalem where God could be worshipped. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6), the first time that the kings and priests were based in the same city, and prepared the foundations for a great Temple, but God would not allow Him to build it (I Chronicles 28:3). That task was given to Solomon (I Kings 5-6; II Chronicles 2-7). Solomon's Temple followed the same pattern as the Tabernacle and took seven years to build (around 956-950BC). It was an immense building decorated with much gold and precious stones. The Temple and its sacrifices were maintained by the members of the tribe of Levi, paid for by an offering of one tenth of their income from the other tribes. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Jerusalem in 586 BC he took many of the dishes and cups from the Temple to Babylon (see II Kings 25:1-26). The system of sacrifices stopped and the Temple fell into disrepair.

The Temple and the city of Jerusalem were central to Jewish identity, and **the Temple represented the place where God lived with His people**. In the Temple we see several amazing truths about God:

1. **He is holy** – the presence of God was in the inner room of the Temple, separated from the sinful people
2. **He is loving** – God wanted to live with His people even though they were sinful – He wanted them to know Him
3. **He can forgive sin only on the basis of sacrifice** – the Temple taught the people that the holy God could not ignore their sin, but that through sacrifice He could forgive their sins.

## An unsolved problem

At the height of Solomon's reign the nation of Israel was at its most powerful and wealthy. They lived at peace in the land God had given them, worshipping Him in the Temple where His presence and glory were and enjoying His blessings. Other nations (e.g. the Queen of Sheba – I Kings 10:1-13) glorified God because of Israel's prosperity and Solomon's wisdom. The promises to Abraham were fulfilled (see I Kings 4:20-21). At the dedication of the Temple Solomon prayed:

*Praise the LORD who has given rest to His people Israel, just as He promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises He gave through His servant Moses* (I Kings 8:56)

Solomon's reign started well, but he had a great weakness – he loved and married many foreign women. God therefore decided to judge him, but because of David He promised to wait until after Solomon's death, when He would divide the nation leaving only a minority under Solomon's son (I Kings 11:9-13). Although the promises of God had been fulfilled, the problem of sin remained! The animal sacrifices at the Temple could not really remove sin – a perfect sacrifice was needed to finally pay for sins. **God's Kingdom could not be restored until sin was dealt with.**

### Key Lesson: God gave the Land of Canaan to the people of Israel

Although God's people (Israel) were now in God's place (Canaan) under God's rule (the Law), God's Kingdom could not be restored perfectly because of the problem of sin. A perfect sacrifice for sin was needed.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 7 – God speaks to His people

### Key Question:

- How can the problem of sin finally be dealt with so that God's Kingdom can really be restored?

### The Kingdom Divided and Defeated [I Kings Ch 12-22, II Kings, II Chronicles Ch 11-36]

After Solomon died in 930 BC the kingdom was divided into two parts as God had foretold, with the majority of the people rejecting David's descendants as kings, just as God had told Solomon. These two separate kingdoms were:

#### Israel– to the north, with its capital in Samaria, including ten of the twelve tribes of Israel

Israel's first king was Jeroboam, who led ten tribes away from David's dynasty. He was afraid that if his people went to Jerusalem in Judah to worship God they would be tempted to return their loyalty to David's dynasty, so he set up two golden calves for them to worship (I Kings 12:25-30). This act of rebellion against God for his own political gain set the tone for the future of Israel. Israel had 19 kings over the next 208 years, none of them from the family of David, and none of them worshipping God alone. The kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and many Jews were taken into Exile from Israel to Assyria. Many of them were assimilated by Assyria and never returned.

#### Judah – to the south, with its capital in Jerusalem, including two tribes (Judah and Benjamin)

The first King of Judah was Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Judah had 19 kings over the following 344 years, all of them from David's family (and one evil queen, Athaliah who was the daughter of Jezebel, widow of King Jehoram of Judah and sister of King Jehoram of Israel). Although they had the Temple and Jerusalem, the nation of Judah also soon became involved in worship of idols. Despite the efforts of some good Kings (notably Josiah – see II Kings 22-23) to restore the nation to God, the general trend was away from Him. Jerusalem was finally conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC and a few years later they destroyed the city and the Temple. Many people from Judah were taken in Exile to Babylon.

#### **Question: Why did God allow his people to be taken out of the land He gave them into Exile?**

#### **Answer: They had failed to keep the Covenant that God had made with them**

Even before the people of Israel entered Canaan God had warned them that they could only live in the land as long as they were obedient to His covenant with them (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15, 64). When the king was a good man (in several cases in Judah, but never in Israel), the people tended to worship God, but when the king was bad they began to worship false gods and idols. Generally over time the kings of both Israel and, more gradually, Judah became increasingly sinful. They broke God's Law, oppressed the poor people within Israel, and failed to show God to other nations. Even though they made sacrifices to God, their hearts were far from Him and full of sin, so their sacrifices were not acceptable to God. God warned the Israelites about this many times through men called prophets (see books like Amos), but they would not listen. The prophets describe the Israelites as a wife who was not faithful to her husband – they had broken their marriage vows (a picture of God's covenant with them). The Exile to Assyria and Babylon was, therefore, a judgement from God on His people because of their sin (see II Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 22:8-9). The northern kingdom (Israel) was judged first because their sin was greater, but Judah followed 136 years later.

**God's people were no longer in His place under His rule. The Kingdom of God could not be made perfect on earth until the problem of sin was solved.**

### The role of the Prophets – messengers of the Covenant

The prophets were people who spoke words from God to God's people, challenging them to trust in Him and to be faithful to their covenant relationship to Him. The Old Testament prophets came from different backgrounds (some were ordinary shepherds, others were officials) but all were called specially by God to speak for Him. The prophets often spoke about Israel as being like an unfaithful wife who had broken her marriage promises to her husband. God had rescued Israel, and loved her faithfully, but she kept on leaving Him for other gods. This sad story was powerfully acted out in the life of one prophet (Hosea). When God gave prophecies He did not override the prophet's thoughts and feelings. Instead, He revealed His words through the person's own mind and personality. However, the words of prophets are the words of God, and are completely true (II Peter 1:21). Prophecies often had two perspectives – they referred to the present circumstances of God's people but also looked forward to God's future plans for the Messiah. The prophets did not fully understand the significance of the things they said, but knew that God was planning something special for the future (I Peter 1:10-12). Many of the prophets were rejected by the people and actually killed because their message, although true, was unpopular with people who wanted to live their own way rather than God's way (Luke 11:47-51).

Sixteen Old Testament books (Isaiah to Malachi) are called books of prophecy. A number of other prophets who did not write books included in the Bible are mentioned in the Old Testament. The most significant of these were **Elijah and Elisha**, who lived in the northern Kingdom of Israel around 875-797 BC (see I Kings 17- II Kings 13). They spoke out strongly against the worship of false gods and the corrupt kings of Israel in their time, and many miracles were performed during their lives. Elijah is significant because he represents all of the prophets (as Moses represents the Law).

### Themes in the messages of the Prophets

#### 1. Warnings to the Israelites that they must repent or face judgement by God

These messages came mainly before the Exile of Israel or Judah. The books of Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk contain many warnings to God's people.

## 2. Warnings to the enemies of Israel and Judah

Four of the prophetic books are mainly concerned with enemies of God's people: Obadiah (against Edom), Jonah (who went to the Assyrian capital Nineveh to call people to repentance), Nahum (against Assyria) and Zephaniah (against all nations). There are also messages against other nations in other prophetic books (e.g. Jeremiah 46-51).

## 3. Predictions about a coming Saviour for God's people (called the Messiah)

These prophecies are scattered throughout many of the prophetic books, and many prophecies about the Messiah are also found in Psalms. Examples of these predictions are discussed further below.

## 4. Promises about God's future kingdom including Gentile (non-Jewish) people

These prophecies (e.g. Amos 9:11-15) are often connected with the promise of the coming Messiah. They look forward to a time when people from all nations of the earth would be part of God's Kingdom.

## 5. Encouragement to rebuild the Temple and purify their worship of God

This was the major theme of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi after the return from the Exile.

# Prophecies about the Messiah

The Old Testament contains many prophecies about a special person called the Messiah (meaning God's "anointed one" or "chosen one"). This person would bring people from all nations to know God (He would be a "Saviour", rescuing the people from the results of their sins). There are two major pictures of the Messiah in the Old Testament, and we will examine prophecies of King David (recorded in the Psalms) and Isaiah to learn about these two strands of prophecy:

### A] The Conquering King who will rule forever on David's throne

There are around 500 prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of a great King who would be a descendant of David and would rule forever with justice on David's throne and defeat the enemies of God.

#### *David's prophecy – Psalm 110*

- God is speaking to David's Lord (David's King), honouring him at His own right hand (verse 1)
- This King will rule from Jerusalem over his enemies (verses 2-3)
- The King will also be a priest like Melchizedek (verse 4)
- The Lord will judge through this King (verses 5-7)

#### *Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 11:1-10 (see also Isaiah 42 – the Servant of God)*

- A new branch will arise from David's family (verses 1-2)
- This King will be obedient to God, ruling in absolute justice (verses 3-5)
- In His Kingdom the Curse will be undone – animals will no longer fight each other or attack humans (verses 6-8)
- All people on earth will know God, and this King will draw all nations to Himself (verses 9-10)

### B] The Suffering Servant who would die for the sins of the people

There are around 300 prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of a servant of God who would be rejected by the people, suffer and die as a sacrifice for sins.

#### *David's prophecy – Psalm 22:1-18*

- He will be forsaken by God despite his faith in Him (verses 1-5)
- He will be mocked by others even though He has always been faithful to God (verses 6-10)
- He will have extreme thirst at a time when He is surrounded by His enemies (verses 11-16)
- His hands and feet will be pierced, and His clothes divided among his enemies using lots (verses 17-18)

#### *Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 52:13-53:12*

- The Servant will be highly exalted (52:13)
- He will be severely beaten and disfigured (52:14) and will be rejected by God's people (53:1-3)
- He will suffer for the sins of others, but He will have no sin, and will be silent when He is tried (53:4-9)
- His death is a sacrifice for sins and will make it possible for many to be made righteous (53:10-12)
- He Himself will see the results of His suffering, and will be honoured for it (53:11, 12)

## Who could fulfil these prophecies?

Jewish scholars had different opinions about whether these two strands of prophecy would be fulfilled in one person, or whether they were speaking about two different people. By the time of Jesus most Jewish people expected the Messiah to be the Conquering King, but not the Suffering Servant, because they could not imagine how someone who was obedient to God suffering in the way the Suffering Servant would. However, during His lifetime on earth, Jesus fulfilled every one of the prophecies about the Suffering Servant (for example, Psalm 22 describes His crucifixion and Isaiah 53 explains its spiritual significance). The *Module 1 Study Aids* contain a chart showing a sample of 25 Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. The fulfilment of many of these prophecies was impossible for Him to control – they often depended on the choices and actions of others. The accuracy of Old Testament prophecy is an amazing proof of the truth of the Bible.

So, then, Jesus was the Suffering Servant of God who came to die for the sins of the people. In the New Testament studies we will also see how in the future Jesus will fulfil the Old Testament prophecies about the Conquering King when He returns to earth a second time. **Jesus came to bring God's Kingdom to completion by dealing with the problem of sin!**

### **Key Lesson: the Old Testament looks forward to the Messiah, a Saviour for all nations**

The problem of sin could only finally be dealt with by the coming of God's chosen One, the Messiah. He would be both a Conquering King, who would bring in the perfect Kingdom of God by bringing judgement and defeating God's enemies, and a Suffering Servant who would die as the perfect sacrifice for sins. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant during His life and death on earth, and will return as the Conquering King in the future.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 8 – Exile and Return to the Land

### Key Questions:

- How did the Israelites survive in Exile and return to their own land? How does the Old Testament end?

### God, in His grace, preserves His people

The Exile of the Israelites was an act of judgement by God. Although some Jewish people stayed in their own land, many were taken away to Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Three nations ruled over this region successively:

<b>Assyrians</b>	1100-625 BC	The northern kingdom (Israel) was exiled during their reign (722 BC)
<b>Babylonians</b>	625-539 BC	The southern kingdom (Judah) was exiled in several stages (605 BC, some Jewish nobles; 598 BC, over 3000 Jews including the king Jehoiachin; 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed; 582 BC, a final group taken into exile)
<b>Persians</b>	539-330 BC	The Jews returned to Jerusalem during their reign (see below)

During the Exile many of the people who had stayed in the land grew far away from God. In the northern kingdom they became the Samaritans of Jesus' day. Some of those who were taken to Mesopotamia also compromised and blended into the society and religion of their rulers, but some of the Jews people remained faithful to God. They longed for the day when they could return to the land God had given them and rebuild the Temple to worship Him (see Psalm 137).

Although Israel rejected and failed God, He still showed His grace by persevering them during the Exile in a number of ways:

- **David's family was preserved** – King Jehoiachin of Judah (who was exiled in 598 BC) found favour with Nebuchadnezzar's successor as king of Babylon, with the result that the royal line of David (the line from which the Messiah would come) was preserved (see II Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34).
- **Jews in high positions influenced the rulers of Babylon and Persia** – Several young Jews, including Daniel, became high officials in the Babylonian administration (see the book of Daniel). Later, in around 460 BC, a Jewish woman called Esther became the Queen of the Persian Empire at a time when some people were plotting to kill all the Jews. Esther used her influence with the King to save the Jews (see the book of Esther).
- **God used the change in government to allow His people to return to Jerusalem** – The changes in the system of government of the three ruling nations made it possible for the Jews who had remained faithful to return to Jerusalem (the Persians believed in greater autonomy of regions within their Empire than the Babylonians).

### Prophets of the Exile

Four major prophets spanned the period of the Exile. Each of them wrote a book that bears their name:

- **Isaiah** (740-681) – prophesied in Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, including the time when Israel went into Exile. Had a special focus on Jerusalem, and his prophecies include many visions of the Messiah.
- **Jeremiah** (627-586) – warned the last kings of Judah about the impending Exile to Babylon and the futility of trying to resist the invading forces. Mentions a faithful remnant of God's people. Also wrote Lamentations after Jerusalem fell.
- **Ezekiel** (593-571) – taken into Exile in Babylon in 598 BC and there received visions from God and spoke to the Jews in Exile. Foresaw a time when God would give people a new heart through His Spirit living in them.
- **Daniel** (605-536) – taken into Exile in 605 BC when he was just a teenager. He lived in Babylon until he was over 90 years old and became an important figure in the government. Lived until after the first return from Exile.

Through these four prophets God foretold many important details about the period of the Exile and subsequent history:

#### God would use a man called Cyrus to return His people to the land (Isaiah 44:28-5)

Isaiah, writing around 688 BC (100 years before Jerusalem fell) mentioned the name of the Persian king who would allow the Jews to return to their land. Cyrus would not worship God (45:4-5) but would permit the Temple to be rebuilt (44:28).

#### The Exile would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14)

Through Jeremiah, God revealed that the Exile of the people of Judah would last for 70 years. Jeremiah was writing in 606 BC, and the first exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC, almost exactly 70 years later, fulfilling his prophecy (Ezra 1:1).

#### The Kingdoms of the World and the coming Kingdom of God (Daniel 2)

Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a statue with five parts that represented four great powers that would dominate the Middle East:

1. <b>The head of gold</b>	Babylonian Empire	(625-539 BC)
2. <b>The chest and arms of silver</b>	Medo-Persian Empire	(539-330 BC)
3. <b>Belly and thighs of bronze</b>	Grecian Empire	(330-146 BC)
4. <b>Legs of iron</b>	Roman Empire	(146 BC – 476 AD)

The feet of iron mixed with clay represented the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the disunited European powers that would follow it. A great stone fell and hit the statue's feet, crushing the entire statue. This represents the future eternal Kingdom of God that will *"crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever"* (Daniel 2:44).

#### The Jews would be under foreign rule for 430 years (Ezekiel 4:5-6)

God asked Ezekiel to enact the siege of Jerusalem and to make a public demonstration by lying on his side for a total of 430 days, each day representing one year during which God's people would be under His judgement. Beginning in 598 BC, when the last truly independent king of Judah was taken in exile to Babylon (subsequent kings were basically puppet rulers installed by Nebuchadnezzar), 430 years brings us to 168 BC. In that year the Jews began a revolt against their Greek rulers which would lead to an independent kingdom ruled by the Maccabees (see *Module 2 Study Aids* for more information).

### The date when the Messiah would come and die (Daniel 9:20-27)

Daniel received a message from an angel called Gabriel. This angel is mentioned only one other time in the Bible – when he came to tell Mary that she would become pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:19&26). When Gabriel visited Daniel, he was praying, as the faithful Jews in Babylon often did, for the city of Jerusalem. Gabriel told Daniel that:

- A period of 490 years (70 'sevens' of years) would be special for the Jews (verse 24, "your people")
- During this period of time six tasks must be fulfilled (verse 24). They involve the removal of sin and the restoration of righteousness.
- The 490 years would begin with a decree allowing the people to "restore and rebuild Jerusalem" (verse 25)
- After 483 years (seven sevens plus 62 sevens) the Messiah ("the Anointed One, the ruler") would come (verse 25)
- The Messiah would be "cut off and will have nothing" (verse 26) – meaning that he would die

The decree to rebuild Jerusalem (distinct from Cyrus's decree which allowed the Temple to be rebuilt) was made by the Persian King Artaxerxes in 457 BC (Ezra 7:12-26). We can, therefore calculate the year for the Messiah to come:

**Decree passed** 457 BC      **Plus 483 years**      **equals** 27 AD (there was no year 0)

AD 27 is very close to the date when John the Baptist baptised Jesus, marking the beginning of His public ministry (see *Part 15*). Daniel's prophecy came true! Just as he foretold, the Messiah died, apparently accomplishing nothing (verse 26), but the six tasks listed in verse 24 were the spiritual results of this death (dealing with sin and restoring righteousness). One more seven year period for the Jewish people remains outstanding (verses 26b-27) to be fulfilled by Christ in the future.

## The return from Exile

The Persian king Cyrus, who conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, gave permission for the Jews to return to their own land and to rebuild their Temple, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. He also returned the gold and silver items stolen in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar. The faithful Jewish people returned in three waves and they rebuilt the city in stages:

Date	Jewish Leader	Number	Mission	References
538 BC	Zerubbabel – the heir of King David	50,000 people	The Temple was restored and sacrifices begin again. The work was finally completed in 518 BC	Ezra 1-6
458 BC	Ezra – an expert in the Law	2,000 men & their families	Priests and Temple servants returned with Ezra, who reminded the people of the Law.	Ezra 7-10
445 BC	Nehemiah – an official in Persia	Small group	The walls of the city were rebuilt, and the people returned to worshipping God.	Nehemiah

The order of this rebuilding of Jerusalem shows the priorities of the people. Sacrifice to God was of first importance and their own protection (the city walls) was the last priority! Through the Exile God purified the Jews, and those who returned never again worshipped idols. God's preservation of His chosen nation during the period of the Exile is amazing. The survival of the nation of Israel throughout history is another great proof that the Bible is true. No other nation has kept its identity for so many centuries despite so much opposition, and no other nation has given the world so many gifted people.

## A Review of the Old Covenant and the history of Israel

The Old Testament closes around 430 BC, with the people of Israel in the Land God had given them, worshipping Him with sacrifices at His Temple in Jerusalem, but under the rule of a foreign king (of the Persian Empire). Remember that the nation of Israel had been chosen by God for three reasons (see *Part 4*):

### 1. To show other nations God's power and goodness

The people were successful in doing this some times, especially in the times of Moses and Joshua (see Joshua 2:8-11) and David (see I Samuel 17:46) and Solomon. However, under most of their kings the people were unfaithful to God and worshipped false gods and idols, and so they failed to show the nations God's character. During the Exile God used Daniel to show His power to the kings of Babylonia and Persia. The return from Exile freed the people to worship God alone in the Temple, but the nation was small and still under the rule of Persia. They had failed to show God to the nations. Jonah's reluctance to take God's message to Israel's enemy, Assyria, demonstrates this failure powerfully.

### 2. To receive and to preserve God's word

The people of Israel were very faithful at recording God's word. Although there were times during the rule of the kings that they lost the written copies of the Law, kings like Josiah (see II Kings 22:8) and faithful priests and prophets maintained God's word even through the nation's darkest times. During the Exile many Jews became more faithful in memorising the Law of God so that it could not be lost. After the return from Exile, Ezra ensured that the people would remember God's word. The fact that we have the Old Testament today is because the people of Israel succeeded in this responsibility.

### 3. To produce a Saviour for all nations (the Messiah)

At the close of the Old Testament the Messiah still had not come and the people were not sure how or when He would come. The very last words of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:1-6) speak of the coming day of God's judgement and promise that the "Sun of Righteousness" will arise on people who were faithful to God (verse 2). This is a great promise about the coming Messiah. Before the Messiah came, however, there would be a forerunner who would be like the prophet Elijah (verse 5).

**Ultimately, the Old Covenant failed because of the sinfulness of the people.** God gave them a way to worship Him through sacrifices, reminding them that they needed forgiveness for their sins, but no animal sacrifice animal could really take away their sins. The prophets pointed forward to a time when the Messiah would come and bring a New Covenant through which sins could finally be forgiven (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and God's *Conquering King* would rule over His people forever (Isaiah 9:6-7). First, though, the problem of sin had to be dealt with through a perfect sacrifice for sins: the *Suffering Servant* had to die (Isaiah 53:1-12).

### Key Lesson: The Old Testament ends with Israel in failure but preserved by God's grace

The nation of Israel failed because of sin. The Old Testament gave the pattern for how God's Kingdom could be restored, but this could not happen until the Messiah dealt with the problem of sin. The Old Testament ends awaiting His coming.