

Lesson 3: An Overview of the Bible

- I. In Lesson 2, we learned that God has revealed Himself to humankind through the teachings and writings of the inspired Prophets
 - A. These works are available to us today through the pages of the Bible.
 - B. The word “Bible” comes from a Greek word meaning books
 1. For the Bible is actually a collection of books penned by many different inspired authors over a time span of about 1500 years
 2. Although we seldom think of the Bible in this way, it really is appropriate to think of it as a library of sorts
 - C. Because of that fact, if we are to use the Bible as God truly intended, we must understand not only the content but the setting and organization of the writings so we can apply them properly to us today - that is the focus of this lesson

- II. Our Bible is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and New Testament
 - A. The term testament comes from a Greek word that might better be translated as “contract” or “covenant”.
 - B. The basic idea is that over the course of time God made two different covenants with His people, and the New Covenant replaced the Old.
 - C. The Old Covenant dominates the 39 books of the Old Testament and in our modern English Bibles, these books are arranged in groups:
 1. The 5 books of Law (Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Levit., Numbers, Deut.
 2. The 12 books of History: Joshua to Esther
 3. The 5 books of Poetry: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon
 4. The 5 Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel
 5. And the 12 Minor Prophets: Hosea to Malachi
 - a. Note the terms major and minor do not indicate any difference in the importance of the books for all are inspired and come from God
 - b. Rather, it merely refers to the fact that the books from the major prophets are larger in size than the books of the minor Prophets
 6. This ordering in the English Bible comes from the Latin Vulgate translation which in turn is derived from the Septuagint (Greek version of the OT).
 - D. The 27 books of the New Covenant are organized in four New Testament groups:
 1. The Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
 - a. The first three - Matthew, Mark and Luke - are known as the Synoptic Gospels because of their similar contents
 - b. John in all probability was written at a later date
 2. The book of Church History: Acts
 3. The 21 Epistles (letters): Romans to Jude
 - a. The first thirteen Epistles are attributed to Paul: Romans to Philemon
 - b. I & II Timothy and Titus are known as the Pastoral Epistles
 - c. The author of Hebrews is a bit uncertain; some say Paul, some say others

- d. Then are 7 General Epistles: James, I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude
 4. The 1 book of prophecy: Revelation
- III. The original inspired Bible manuscripts were written in 3 languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek
- A. These languages are still spoken today.
 1. Hebrew is found in Israel
 2. Aramaic is spoken in Syria and a few other places
 3. Greek, although it still exists in Greece, is quite different from the language of the New Testament
 - B. Almost all of the 39 Old Testament books were written in Hebrew.
 1. Hebrew is one of a large family of languages known as Semitic Languages
 2. It is written from right to left and has 22 consonants with no vowels.
 3. Because of that, it sounds quite different to English speaking people and uses a vocabulary that is unrelated to English words.
 - C. Aramaic is a kindred language to Hebrew.
 1. It became the language of the common man in Palestine after the time of the Babylonian exile around 500 BC
 2. Nehemiah 8:8 is usually understood to mean that the people did not know pure Hebrew and needed a translation into the more familiar Aramaic.
 3. In the centuries prior to the time of Jesus, Aramaic was spoken by the Jews
 4. Because of that, some portions of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew
 5. The New Testament actually quotes Jesus using Aramaic
 - a. Matt 27:46 - "Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani" that is "My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?"
 - b. Jesus often addressed God as "Abba" (Aramaic for Father, Mark 14:36)
 - D. Although Jesus actually spoke in Aramaic, the original New Testament manuscripts were written in Greek.
 1. In the 1st century, Greek was to the world as English is today - the closest thing to a world-wide, common language that could be understood by all
 2. Specifically, it was Hellenistic or Koine (common) Greek - Universal Language
- IV. The Bible describes events spanning the time from the creation up through the establishment and early years of the Church in the 1st century AD
- A. Over this timeframe, God has dealt with humankind in different ways as the relationship and knowledge of Him has grown
 1. In a similar fashion, one might compare this to how a parent deals with a child as that child grows from infancy to adulthood.
 2. Consequently, as we read the Bible, we must pay particular attention to the context noting the people, the setting and the time period under consideration
 3. This is essential information for determining what and how Scriptures are applicable to us today

- B. In general, the Biblical timeline encompasses three ages or dispensations
 - 1. The Patriarchal Age or The Patriarchal Dispensation
 - 2. The Mosaic Age
 - 3. The Christian Age
- C. The Patriarchal Age is the first dispensation, and it began at the time of creation
 - 1. The word Patriarch refers to the "Father" or head of a family
 - a. During this dispensation, God spoke directly to the Patriarchs (Fathers) communicating His expectations and empowering these men with the authority to teach and lead their families according to God's will
 - b. Under this system, families relied on the oral message from God communicated through the Fathers because they had no written revelation to follow
 - c. Centuries later, the history of this time period was recorded for us, and it now can be found in our Old Testament Scriptures starting in Genesis chapter 1 and extending to Exodus chapter 20
 - 2. The characters and stories from the Patriarchal Dispensation are rich in revealing much about the nature of God and humankind and the historical background and promises giving rise to God's people.
 - 3. A chronological summary of some of the key people and stories from this period would include:
 - a. The creation of the heavens and earth and the first couple, Adam and Eve
 - b. The temptation of the forbidden fruit and the sinful fall of man in the Garden of Eden orchestrated by the devil acting through the serpent
 - c. It details the first murder with Cain killing his brother Abel
 - d. There is the flood account whereby God destroyed an earth filled with evil, sparing only some of the animals, Noah and his family through the ark
 - e. The tower of Babel whereby God confused the languages to undermine an arrogant people who defied God's will to go forth and fill the earth
 - f. The covenant with Abraham promising an elderly, barren couple that they would produce a mighty nation from whom all the world would be blessed
 - g. Hagar giving birth to Ishmael
 - h. The destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah as a people who rejected Godliness
 - i. The birth of Isaac and Abraham's test of faith by His willingness to obey God even to the point of sacrificing his own son, the promised heir
 - j. Isaac's marriage to Rebekah and the birth of their sons, Jacob and Essau
 - k. God's blessing for Jacob, renaming him Israel, and granting him 12 sons
 - l. Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, falling into conflict with his brothers and being sold as a slave in Egypt
 - 1) There while serving Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard, Joseph is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and sent to prison
 - 2) Even in prison, God blessed Joseph and he rose to prominence
 - m. Eventually after interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph rose to 2nd in command of all Egypt
 - 1) Then during a famine, he was able to save his family from starvation

- 2) And reunite with his family bringing them to live in the land of Egypt
- 3) There by the blessings of God, the 12 sons of Israel prospered and through their offspring produced the 12 tribes of the chosen nation of Israel
- n. In time as generations passed, the new Pharaoh perceived a threat by having such a mighty people in their midst and made the Jews slaves
- o. However, through the birth of Moses, God groomed a deliverer for Israel
 - 1) When Pharaoh refused the request of Moses to let the Jews go free, God sent 10 plagues upon Egypt with the last being the death of all their first born - while Passing Over the people of Israel
 - 2) After freeing Israel, Pharaoh went back on his word chasing the Jews to the shores of the Red Sea
 - 3) There only to see the Red Sea part with Moses leading the people to safety as the waters collapsed on the Egyptian soldiers in pursuit
- p. From there, Moses led the people into the wilderness of Sinai
- D. At this point, we see the beginning of a new dispensation, known as the Mosaic Age or Mosaic Dispensation
 1. As the term suggests, it is associated with the Old Law or Old Covenant established with the nation of Israel and delivered to the people by God through Moses
 - a. The Mosaic Age covers the timeframe from the giving of the Law of Moses to the establishment of the Church around 30 AD
 - b. During this period, God spoke to the people through inspired Prophets
 - c. And over time, these Prophets wrote down the things God revealed providing us with the books of the Old Testament
 - d. Within our Bible, the events of the Mosaic dispensation are documented in the books from Exodus chapter 20 up through the second chapter in Acts
 - 1) This includes the bulk of the Old Testament as well as the early part of the New Testament
 - 2) The Gospels and first two chapters of Acts are actually included under the Mosaic dispensation because during His lifetime on earth, Jesus lived as a Jew under the Mosaic Law
 - 3) It was only after His death and resurrection that the New Covenant and Christian Era began
 2. The chronology of the Mosaic Age begins with God making a Covenant through Moses with the nation of Israel on Mount Sinai
 - a. We find God directing Moses to send 12 men to spy out the Promised land
 - 1) Only to have 10 of the 12 return with a fearful report questioning their ability to vanquish such mighty foes
 - 2) For their lack of faith in God, the nation was sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness
 - b. When Moses died, Joshua took over command and led Israel into the Promised land taking the city of Jericho as the walls came tumbling down

- c. Following the death of Joshua, came the period of the Judges, where the nation functioned more as 12 separate tribes undergoing cycles of being faithful to God and then becoming unfaithful again
 - 1) Periodically leaders arose to save the nation from foreign oppression
 - 2) These leaders were known as judges - people like Gideon, Deborah and Samson
- d. Samuel, being the last judge, served as a transitional figure appointing the first earthly King of the nation, at the request of a people who rejected the wise counsel of God
- e. This period of the Kings began with Saul and included the famous defeat of Goliath, the Philistine giant, who was dispatched by the sling of a young shepherd boy named David
- f. David went on to become the next king, but then fell into a sinful union with Bathsheba ultimately ordering the death of her husband, Uriah, after David's futile attempts to cover-up his affair and the conception of a child
- g. Solomon, the heir to David's throne, went on to become the wisest man who ever lived, being granted his request for wisdom in response to a humble prayer out of concern about leading God's people
- h. When Solomon's son, Rehoboam, rejected sound advice and overburdened his people, the Kingdom divided into two nations
 - 1) Rehoboam became King of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, ruling over the southern kingdom called Judah with Jerusalem as its capital
 - 2) Jeroboam ruled over the remaining 10 tribes in the northern Kingdom known as Israel with Samaria eventually becoming the chief city
- i. The history of the Northern Kingdom encompasses many well known Bible characters
 - 1) The wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were among the most notorious
 - 2) There were also the Prophets Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Amos and of course, Jonah, who was taught a lesson from the belly of a large fish
- j. Ultimately, the Northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC
 - 1) The people were carried into captivity and assimilated into a mixed population
 - 2) This produced the Samaritans who were spurned by the pure-blooded Jews
- k. The Southern Kingdom of Judah had its noteworthy characters also
 - 1) King Hezekiah who resisted the Assyrians and King Josiah the great reformer
 - 2) There were also the well-known Prophets Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel
- l. The Southern Kingdom eventually was taken captive by the Babylonians
 - 1) This occurred under the reign of King Zedekiah about 586 BC

- 2) The Jewish exiles from the Southern Kingdom were allowed to have their own settlements, and so they did not lose their identity as did the Samaritans
- m. The Babylonian empire eventually was replaced by the Medes and Persians
 - 1) And King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple
 - 2) In 445 BC, the Persian King, Artaxerxes the first, gave Nehemiah permission to rebuild the city of Jerusalem
 - 3) It was during this time that the Prophet Ezra sought to restore the people's faith through the Law of Moses
 - 4) By now, the Hebrew language was becoming less the language of common use, with most Jews outside Judea speaking Aramaic or Greek by the New Testament times
- n. The recorded story of the Old Testament really ends with the Prophets Ezra and Nehemiah
- o. From secular history, we know that Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire
 - 1) And inaugurated a period of Greek rule from 336-323 BC
 - 2) After his death, the empire broke into smaller empires ruled by his generals
- p. Eventually, a Seleucid King defeated the armies of Egypt and took possession of Palestine, including Judea
 - 1) When the king attempted to make political appointments to the Jewish high priesthood, and plundered the Temple and erected an altar to a pagan god, the devout Jews were outraged
 - 2) This led to the Maccabean revolt with the Jews winning independence to manage their own affairs and to cleanse the Temple
- q. In about 63 BC, the Romans took control of the whole region
 - 1) With King Herod coming to power in 37 BC
 - 2) It was during his reign that Jesus the Christ was born
- r. As noted earlier, Jesus was born a Jew and lived His life under the Mosaic Dispensation
 - 1) Through His ministry to the Jewish people, He taught about the coming Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 4:17)
 - 2) He lived a perfect life and revealed the nature and will of God to those who would hear
 - 3) By His sacrifice on the cross, salvation was offered to all humankind
- E. That brings us to the third and final dispensation - the Christian Dispensation
 1. It marks the arrival of that Coming Kingdom through the creation of the Church
 - a. For centuries the Jewish people had been waiting for the arrival of an anointed one, the Messiah, who would sit on the throne of David according to the prophecies found in II Sam 7, Isa 9:6-7
 - b. On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter confirmed that this was Jesus,

the Christ (Acts 2:36)

2. Through the Church, God established a New Covenant with humankind replacing the Old Covenant which had been made with the nation of Israel
 - a. One of the distinguishing features about the Old Covenant was the fact that the Old Covenant was made only with the nation of Israel
 - 1) Ex 19:1-7 chronicle the giving of the Old Law to Israel on Mt Sinai
 - 2) In Deut 5:1-5, Moses refers to this covenant as having been given to all Israel not to their Fathers
 - b. Years later in Jer 31:31-34, Jeremiah prophesied that the Old Covenant would be replaced with a New Covenant saying:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

3. In the New Testament era, the Apostle Paul, who also was a Jew, wrote in Eph 3:1-7, making it clear that this New Covenant was open to all humankind, both Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul himself saying "to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,"
 4. The Apostle Peter also attested to this fact in his remarks at the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family recorded in Acts 10:34-36
 5. Because this final dispensation is based on the sacrifice of Jesus, it usually is associated with the establishment of the Church on the day of Pentecost
 6. So the Biblical record of the Christian Dispensation is contained in the New Testament Books starting at Acts chapter 2 and continuing through rest of the New Testament ending with the book of Revelation
 7. The Gospels and first chapter of Acts are included in the New Testament because they describe the birth, ministry and sacrifice of Jesus the Christ who is the founder of the Christian Dispensation
- V. By now, hopefully you have a better feel for the organization and content of the Bible.
- A. This is particularly important when it comes to understanding how to apply these teachings to our individual lives.
 - B. One of the most common ways that the Bible is misused is by taking passages out of context or improperly applying specific teachings
 1. We must always be careful to understand to whom the passage is being

written

2. And under what dispensation or setting the passage is given
 3. While there are many teaching and lessons that apply across all Ages/Dispensations, there are some that do not
 - a. One example is the offering of animal sacrifices which were part of the Patriarchal and Mosaic Ages but are no longer commanded in the Christian Era
 - b. Indeed, worship practices under the Law of Moses were only specified for the nation of Israel, and these ended with the onset of the Christian Age
 - C. Since we live in the Christian dispensation, we must focus on the teachings and expectations that God has revealed to us in these last days through His Son (Heb 1:2)
 1. That is the way we learn how to live a righteous life before God in this day and age
 2. It is also where we discover the truth about salvation as well as the Church and what God intended for its organization, its mission and its worship
- VI. We are now equipped with the Spiritual tool needed to understand the challenging aspects of our Spiritual nature.
- A. Probably, the most obvious question is "Why should we care?"
 1. We know we have a physical body of flesh and blood living in the well-defined environment on this earth - that fact is readily apparent to us
 2. Moreover, our physical life can be productive, meaningful and pleasurable
 3. Isn't that enough?
 4. In contrast, the whole thought of a spiritual realm is foreign and abstract to us -
 - a. It is, after all, unnatural by definition since it embraces another realm - the spiritual realm
 - b. So why bother or worry about it?
 - B. To answer that question, we must consider "The Problem of Sin"
 - C. And that is the subject of our next Lesson
 - D. Please join me as we continue our study together