

## **In the Beginning: A Brief Description of the Pentateuch (Creation to Moses)**

When you pick up a new book do you start reading at page 62 or 157? Of course not—usually you begin a book on the first page. This way you have the context, you know the plot, and you become familiar with the main characters. To begin a story in the middle is to miss essential elements that make a story *a story*, or a poem *a poem*, or an historical outline *an outline*.

The Bible is the living and active word of God. It is the inspired (“God-breathed”), authoritative, inerrant word of God. But it is also a story, a saga of salvation that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is a sequence of events, and every passage of Scripture fits somewhere along the timeline. Just as it is not wise or effective to pick up an average book and read it out of sequence, neither is it wise to pick up the Bible and just start reading in the middle without having some idea of the plot, the characters, or the context. Because, however, the Bible is the Word of God it is powerful no matter what passage we read (e.g., the Psalms, Proverbs, etc.), but the reading and contemplation of the story of God’s salvation is richer and far more meaningful if it is read in context in order to facilitate one’s understanding of “the big picture.”

So how does our understanding of God’s “big picture” begin to be formed? Where is our “page one” of God’s story of salvation history?

There are five books that precede all other books of the Bible. As a unit they are called the Pentateuch, from *penta*, meaning “five,” and *teukhos*, meaning “scroll” or “book.” These five books lay the foundation for all biblical study. They are the root and the foundation for all that follows. They are *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. In the beginning God creates the heavens and the earth. This happens in the first chapters of Genesis. God creates man and woman in his image. God is the source and purpose of their existence, and everything is good. But they rebel against their Creator, and sin enters the world. Sin, like a cancer, subsequently permeates and corrupts not only men but their societies and natural environments. Selfishness, misdirected devotion, and death enter the world. From that point on, God begins the great drama of salvation.

Like a lost and rebellious son who has turned in disobedience from his father, mankind has rushed toward destruction. Like a devoted father, God pursues man with tender love, deliverance, discipline, and redemption. God makes covenants with his estranged mankind to draw them closer and to reestablish the lost bond between Creator and creation, between Father and sons. God establishes ever expanding covenantal relationships with men as He reveals more of himself and his divine plan of redemption. Adam and Eve messed up everything, but God has promised to restore the lost innocence.

Noah survives the destruction of God’s cleansing of the earth from wicked mankind. God calls Abraham away from worshipping idols in the pagan land of Mesopotamia and promises him his own land. God establishes a covenant with the faithful and obedient Abraham who believes and trusts God. He takes him to the fruitful and strategically located land of Canaan. He promises it to Abraham and to his descendants after him. Abraham has a son of promise named Isaac who begets

Jacob and Esau. God renews his covenant with Jacob and blesses him with twelve sons, who become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob is given the new name *Israel*, from which the land gets its name. The twelve tribes of Israel go to Egypt during a famine. They multiply and prosper in Egypt, and eventually the Pharaoh, out of fear of their growing strength and numbers, turns them into slaves. After the people of Israel suffer 400 years of bondage, God raises up a deliverer named Moses.

God uses Moses to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt and to realize the promise God made to Abraham—that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (known later as Israel). With tremendous power and miracles, Moses leads the children of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea and through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Here at the mountain God gives his newly delivered people his law. It is called the Law of Moses because it was revealed to Moses and written down for posterity. The people do not trust God, however, and even after seeing his divine power and love, they grumble against God and Moses, and they are condemned to wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years until that wicked generation dies out.

Moses is a strong national leader. He holds the huge number of people together as a shepherd as they follow God who leads them eventually to the Promised Land. In the wilderness they are instructed by God and given his tabernacle, which contains the ark of the covenant, at which the presence of God dwells. A priesthood is established and a national structure. No earthly king is appointed. God is their king, and He works through his prophet and law-giver Moses. After forty years the people arrive at the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses dies before entering the Promised Land but not before laying his hands on his faithful servant Joshua and passing his authority on to him, including the mandate to begin the conquest of Canaan.

With an understanding of these first chapters, we now have an historical context for all the books of the Bible that follow. We know the key plot: God created the universe, and He created man in His own image, and it was very good. Through man's rebellion, sin entered the world. Sin brought death to mankind and disharmony to the world made for man. God promised to restore mankind and the fallen world to their original innocence. We also know the key characters: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons (Israel), and Moses. God formed profound covenant relationships with these characters to build a foundation for the salvation of the world.

As the story progresses from here, we know that all the drama points that follow will be oriented toward God's enduring faithfulness to the typically faith-*less* people whom He loves beyond measure. What is unfolding is an epic drama and love story, spanning the creation of the world to its final destiny, which ultimately is Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Pentateuch is a template for God's redemption of not only Israel, but all mankind—a plan to bring all humanity back to Him.

Now that we have laid the foundation and understand the flow of the story up to this point, we are ready to dive into the exciting and instructive chapters of God's salvation that follow.