

THE
HEART
of the
BIBLE

The Old Testament
is the New Testament concealed.
The New Testament
is the Old Testament revealed.

THE
HEART
of the
BIBLE

HUGH HILL

MONARCH
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Introduction

The book I wish I'd read before going to Bible college – that's what I wanted to call this book, for it sums up much of what I felt was the foundation on which to build biblical knowledge.

The Bible can be looked at in many ways enabling the study of doctrines, themes, characters, timelines and so forth, and to some degree *The Heart of the Bible* attempts all of these. It began life as a three-year series of Sunday morning sermons at Thomas Cooper Memorial Evangelical Baptist Church in Lincoln, UK, which, for understandable reasons, is known as TCM.

God had graciously blessed the church, and the fellowship was growing in three particular people groups: new converts to Christianity who knew little or nothing about the Bible; students who arrived in Lincoln to attend the new university, many of whom had evangelical church backgrounds though a number of their friends whom they brought along to TCM were unchurched; and folks who for a variety of reasons had moved to the Lincolnshire area.

For some in the third group it was job relocation, others were taking up employment at the new university, and still others were taking advantage of the lower house prices in an attractive part of the country. Many of these men and women had a church background, and all of them expressed a desire to learn more about God and His plan and purpose for their lives. But for reasons which are unfortunately quite common today, many of them, especially the new and recent converts to Christianity, had a superficial view of the Bible.

My response to this wonderful God-given mixture of men and women of all ages and backgrounds was to embark on a three-year preaching plan to bring the message of the Bible, Sunday by Sunday, to the TCM congregation. Beginning with Genesis, each message aimed to cover the historical setting and purpose of a Bible book, as well as including its main theological message and what it means for us today.

The Heart of the Bible clearly has its limitations but, derived as it is from the spoken message, it is deliberately relaxed in style yet packed with information, explanation and clarification. It answers many of the questions that men and women have regarding God's Holy Word, the Bible, and is the book I wished I'd read before going to Bible college.

How to Use this Book

You will find this book is quite unlike other books on the Bible. *The Heart of the Bible* was conceived when each chapter was originally spoken to a live audience. It is not a chapter-by-chapter commentary on the Bible, nor is it an exhaustive study of the text. It is instead a thought-provoking overview explaining the geographical, historical and socio-political background of each book of the Bible, which then brings out the main theological message of the book. In the belief that God's Word is unchanging and relevant for us in our day, the book explains what that means for our modern day society and ourselves as individuals as we strive to live the Christian life in an increasingly godless society. Furthermore, it is a book for Christians old and new.

For the newish Christian: You will find that the *The Heart of the Bible* answers many of the questions you have when trying to reach an understanding of the Bible. As the book provides an overview of each Bible book through straightforward explanations and contemporary illustrations, it is especially useful for providing you with a greater knowledge and understanding of God's Word, and, most importantly, its relevance for you today. It is a must-have companion book to read alongside Scripture and should be referred to each time you start to read a new book in the Bible. This means it is also helpful to use this book as a study aid on discipleship courses such as Alpha, Christianity Explored, and Emmaus.

The mature Christian will find the *The Heart of the Bible* to be a fascinating source of answers to many of the questions you have always wondered about – “Oh, that's what that means!” and “I've always wondered where that fits in...” You will also find the background information and explanation of what is behind current events to be extremely helpful for house groups and cell group, and for Bible studies.

Christians of all ages and levels of experience will gain much personal benefit from using *The Heart of the Bible* for daily reading. You know the blessings that come from a deeper relationship with God. This book will give you further insights to His Word, which will build on your existing knowledge and so broaden your understanding of His plan and purpose for your life.

PART 1

THE OLD TESTAMENT

1

Genesis

– Foundation for Life

The word *genesis* is Greek for “origin” and the original Hebrew *bereshith* means “in the beginning”. Christians believe Genesis is the Bible’s account of the origin of all the basic entities of life and beyond, including the beginning of the universe, life, the human race, marriage, sin, death, family, civilization, literature, culture, music, art, language, warfare, nations and religion. While none of these subjects is examined in absolute detail, Genesis tells us this is how life began and goes on to lay the foundation upon which the human race is built. It could be argued, therefore, that if you deny the traditional view of Genesis, you accept that men and women are the product of animal evolution and therefore animals themselves and nothing more. However, Genesis lifts our eyes above the animals towards a Creator God with the inescapable conclusion that, if we do not have a sense of the supremacy of God, we will never get our lives right.

Genesis tells us “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Chapter 3, however, records how humankind’s representatives, Adam and Eve, gave in to the devil’s temptation – resulting in all of creation falling into sin. But God had anticipated the fall and prepared the second Adam who would come in time and regain all that the first Adam lost, and more.

This means that almost every important church doctrine is found in “seed” form in the book of Genesis: creation, the fall, redemption, the doctrine of the Trinity, the promise of the Messiah, the establishment of the covenant and the hope of the resurrection are all to be found here. Other Old Testament

books explain it more clearly, but a “seed” is planted in Genesis, and through the giving of the Law and the establishing of worship, that “seed” sprouts and grows throughout the rest of the Bible until it finds its fruition in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, all that the Law points towards, all the prophets proclaimed, all Jesus said and all the apostles expounded, depend absolutely for accuracy upon the teaching contained in the book of Genesis, for no other book of the Bible is quoted as frequently or referred to so often as this book.

Chapters 1 to 11 tell of four major events around which the foundation of the Bible is built, and four significant people around whom the Genesis narrative flows.

Creation

The first major event is that of creation. Genesis 1:1 – 2:35 reveals God as the creator of matter, energy, space and time. That men and women are the pinnacle of His creation is of vital importance for it means that as He created us, He alone perfectly understands us and therefore He alone can govern us wisely. Without this message, when we look at our world through the media, when we nurse our hurts and perplexities and fears and doubts, we most often don't see anything that points to an almighty, all-loving God. Nevertheless, when God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26) and gave us authority over the whole earth, we are brought to realize that something profoundly important has occurred. And while, like Paul, in Corinthians 13, we currently see it as if through a poor reflection in a mirror, nevertheless we know that the one who has the power to make us in His own image and likeness has the power to remake and overcome the damage we have caused to ourselves and His creation.

The fall

The second major event was the fall (3:1 – 5:32). Adam and Eve were not created as robots. God created them sinless but, as the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 states, “within them was the capacity to choose evil if they so desired”. That free choice which we so highly value, and the wrong choices we so often make, are part and parcel of the human makeup. In fact, God was so insistent on humans having freedom of choice that He allowed us to live as though He did not exist, even to crucify Him. For only love can summon a response of love

that is the response God wants from us and the reason He created us. Therefore, the secret for the fulfilment of our life is faith in God expressed in obedience to Him. That was the battleground in Eden when Satan tempted Adam and Eve's faith in God with his sly innuendo, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1).

Adam's first mistake was his failure to protect his wife from listening to the tempter; his second was to collaborate with her in rebellion when Satan called into question the goodness and truth of God by his lie, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). Adam and Eve's faith wavered through listening to a slander about God and resulted in their act of disobedience. From this we learn that faith and obedience are always linked. When Adam and Eve's faith failed, obedience ceased and sin entered creation, infecting both the human race and indeed the whole of creation. Sin's escalation is seen where the first sin resulted in men and women being separated from God, while the second, Cain's murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 4), separated man from man.

Adam and Eve on trial

As representatives of the human race Adam and Eve were summoned to appear before God, their Creator and Judge, to answer for the crimes of rebellion and blasphemy. In the biblical context, blasphemy is an attitude of disrespect that finds expression in an act directed against the character of God.

Adam and Eve knew they were guilty and that their crime carried the death penalty. But as they stood before God, something unexpected happened: God chose to intervene on their behalf. He pronounced a curse on the serpent and instead of appearing against them as an enemy He announced His plan for their restoration. The wonder of this was that God Himself was taking their case into His own hands as if He, and only He, had the right and the power to deal with it.

Speaking to the serpent the Lord God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This meant that their deliverance was to be part of God's sovereign purpose. It would not come into effect immediately but through the intervention of the "seed of the woman." So, as human seed is of the man, here in Genesis chapter 3 we have the first suggestion of the virgin birth. This miraculously born person would at some future date enter into conflict with Satan, and while He would suffer, He would be victorious, crushing Satan's power and delivering humankind from the condemnation of sin and even death itself. The plan of salvation is

decreed to be by the grace of God. No terms are imposed, no works required, no mention of any human intervention, only the suffering of the woman's seed. Everything depends upon this Mediator. He is the hope of humankind. He alone can redeem fallen men and women from the curse of the law and restore them to favour and friendship with God. So, although paradise was lost by the devastating curse of the fall God promised paradise would be regained through the seed of the woman.

The crucial importance of Adam and Eve's trial for rebellion and blasphemy would become evident thousands of years later when the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was tried before the religious and secular authorities of Jerusalem and Rome for the same crimes. He was condemned by the Jews for blasphemy for claiming He was God, and by Rome for rebellion for setting Himself up in revolt against lawful authority. And it is here that we see in the fullest sense how He stood in our place. As our Substitute, Jesus suffered, died and rose again for us, and these charges of blasphemy and rebellion that God has against us sinful human beings are the same charges laid on Christ when He took our place. This was no weak, defenceless Jesus being rushed to the cross and nailed there against His will by ruthless men. No! This was God carrying out His carefully premeditated plan of salvation conceived before the foundation of the world and foretold in Genesis chapter 3.

The flood

Third, 6:1 – 9:29 records that the Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth" (Genesis 6:5–7). The world was under a death sentence.

A righteous man and his family in a hostile, God-hating world, awaiting the judgment of God, was a prophetic glimpse of the future of humankind, "But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8).

Noah's salvation from the judgment of the flood by the grace of God illustrates God's way of salvation through His Son. In symbolic language, Jesus can be seen as the ark: He alone is the means of safety from the coming judgment, and His offer of salvation is open to all who believe and enter His shelter by accepting Him as Saviour and Lord. From this we learn that just as the ark was closed by God and it was then too late for people to be saved

(Genesis 7:16). If we are to enjoy the blessings of God, before we die we must be in the ark.

God then confirmed that His covenant with Adam still remains in force, but now adds the provision of human government and its responsibility to enforce law and order. This is known as the Noahic covenant, and as a sign of His promise to never again destroy the earth by flood, God set His rainbow in the sky.

Civilization

The fourth major event – that of civilization – is established after the flood (10:1 – 11:9). Civilization began upon the plain of Shinar and reminds us of the unity of the human race: we are all children of Adam through Noah. The arts flourished and the skills of craftsmen developed, but sin also flourished as the hands that made tools of iron also made weapons of war. Human pride and greed remind us that the arts and crafts are no guarantee humankind will become more humane. Then, in a shocking act of idolatry motivated by the rebellion and pride now deeply ingrained within the human make-up, the Tower of Babel was built to demonstrate humankind's own greatness and his ability to do without God. The fact that the European Parliament building in Strasbourg is deliberately modelled on a painting of the Tower of Babel should provide food for thought.

God's response was to fragment the single culture and language of the post-flood world and scatter the people over the face of the earth. And so began a new phase in Genesis with God focusing on four important individuals.

Abraham

The first important patriarch in the Bible was Abraham, recorded in 12:1 – 25:18). Abraham's calling in Genesis chapter 12 is a pivotal point in the book. In the same way that God began creation with the one man, Adam; He began redemption with Abraham, and through His covenant with Abraham initiated a theme that continued throughout the Bible until Jesus instituted a new covenant at the Lord's Supper on the eve of His crucifixion.

The story of Abraham starts in Genesis 12 when he was called by God to leave the pagan culture of Haran and travel to the land of Canaan, which he would later inherit. This is a brilliant example of the Christian "call". Like

Abraham, Christians too are called to leave their old way of life and follow Jesus into a new life they have never seen but by faith believe in.

In His promise to Abraham God repeats His words of intention, “I will,” six times. His first promise to them was to give them a place to live. His second promise was to give them descendants, and the third to make them a blessing to other nations (Genesis 12:1–3).

In return, God required every Jewish male to be circumcised as a sign they were born into the covenant He had made with Abraham. The ethos of this covenant is at the very heart of the Bible and is the basis upon which God said, “I will be your God and you will be my people” (see Exodus 6:7 and Jeremiah 7:23). This tells us that God wants to be in a relationship with us, a relationship which will be consummated at the end of the age when, as Revelation 21 explains, God Himself will move out of heaven to live with us forever on a new earth.

Isaac

Isaac was the second patriarch in God’s plan to separate a people from the surrounding nations (25:19 – 26:35). To this people would be entrusted the holy revelations of God and from their line the Saviour would be born. By allowing himself to be offered as a sacrifice under Abraham’s knife on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22), Isaac offers us a glimpse of Christ’s faith and submission in Gethsemane and Calvary.

Jacob

Isaac’s youngest son, Jacob (27:1 – 36:43), was the most colourful of the four men. His deception to ensure the birthright of the oldest son came to him, rather than passing to his godless older brother Esau, is a classic example of the right motive executed in the wrong way. His subsequent hard and painful lessons, including being cheated by his uncle Laban, and his wonderful conversion at the brook Jabbok where he wrestled with God, transformed Jacob from a man of selfishness to a servant of God. In recognition of the change in his life, God changed his name to Israel and he became the father of the twelve tribes of the nation of that name (Genesis 32:28).

Joseph

With the benefit of biblical hindsight we can view Joseph's story (37:1 – 50:26) as much more than the downward route from favourite son to household slave and disgraced prisoner then all the way up again to prime minister and saviour of the Egyptian nation and beyond. For, wonderful though that was, the real beauty lies in seeing how God, who does not speak directly to Joseph but gives him dreams, works behind the scenes to arrange circumstances to advance His purposes for the Hebrew nation. This is seen in the move of Joseph's family to Egypt and his insightful reply to his brothers who were understandably worried that he might exact his revenge for what they had done to him: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done" (Genesis 50:20).

In the way God used Joseph to bring reconciliation and salvation to his brothers making them fit to be the foundation of the holy nation of Israel, we see a type of Christ and His mission to bring salvation and reconciliation to the unholy men and women of planet Earth, making them new creations fit to inhabit the new heavens and earth – the kingdom of God. The object of special love from his father, hated by his brothers, conspired against and sold for silver, imprisoned though innocent and raised from humiliation to glory. A prophet foretelling both plenty and famine, Joseph became the saviour of the nation and all the surrounding nations by filling the storehouses with life-giving grain and throwing the gates wide open that all may come to him and live. In Joseph we are given a wonderful glimpse of the "seed of the woman", the mediator, Jesus Christ Himself.

What does all this mean for us today?

By imparting the knowledge of how everything began and the rationale for good and bad, Genesis builds a foundation for life that is based on God's truth and which teaches us there is great significance in our lives.

Jesus taught that there are two ways to go about our lives:

1. we can hear His teaching and put it into practice (which He likened to building a house on rock), or
2. we can hear His teaching and ignore it (which He likened to building a house on sand).

Sand symbolizes the ever-changing philosophies of the world: the wisdom of man. If we reject the teaching of Jesus we build on sand, and no matter how good it looks, sooner or later it will fall like a house of cards. Rock, on the other hand, is the foundation laid by God, and if we listen to Jesus and put His teaching into practice by building our lives on Him and living His way, then we build on security, stability and eternal principles. Genesis reveals God's hand in human affairs through His creative acts, His miraculous interventions and gracious judgments, His call to a life of faith and His covenant promises to us. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

But Genesis does not present these truths as abstract, intangible principles. We are given a succession of stories of real life people. Individuals, who loved and quarrelled, believed and doubted, married and had children, experienced sin and grace. And if we think it through we begin to see ourselves represented in these very accounts.

Like Adam and Eve, we too have believed, doubted, been tempted and fallen, only to find the wondrous truth that there is a way back to God through His grace.

Cain and Abel bring us face to face with sibling rivalry resulting in different religious viewpoints: Cain's humanistic lifestyle made his worship offensive to God and his refusal to submit to God led to a terrible legacy of violence and death. This teaches us that when men and women become obsessed with themselves and refuse to live according to the laws of God, all that matters to them is getting their own way. Such people die as they lived: away from God.

Noah's drunkenness and moral lapse after the flood reminds us of the danger of letting our guard down after an amazing display of faith (Genesis 9:21).

Think of Abraham's faith in emigrating to a strange land on the command of God, having the title "God's friend" and yet compromising his testimony in a very human way by pretending to be his wife's brother to protect his skin. But much more serious was his going along with Sarah's plan for him to have a child by Hagar after having God's promise of a son. In doing so he produced Ishmael who would eventually be regarded by Muslims as Abraham's first son with all the repercussions for Jews, the Middle East and the rest of the world as we have it today (Genesis 16:15; 21:8–20).

Sarah's pain of childlessness, along with God's response, encourages us to know that God understands when we cry out, "You have given me no children, no partner in life, no relief from weakness or pain..." He hears us and loves us and comforts us. Perhaps not the way we want or when we want,

but He will encourage us with the glorious things He has prepared for us in the age to come.

Many can empathize with Isaac and Rebekah, a dysfunctional family suffering from mistrust, intrigue and favouritism. Their story reaches its climax in chapter 27. Think of the lessons for us in Isaac overlooking Esau's irreligious nature and through his misguided favouritism attempting to circumvent God's purpose by blessing the wrong son. And Rebekah the manipulative wife and mother who, displaying a mother's zeal for her son, disregards the personal consequences. When we see the manner in which she instigated the deception against her husband Isaac we realize that Jacob did not owe his natural deception to his father. He was truly his mother's son, and we thus learn the influence a mother has on her children for good or evil.

Jacob and Rachel exemplify a difficult marriage with dreadful in-laws. Read their story in chapters 29–33 and you can imagine Rachel holding onto Jacob's coat-tails, trying to slow him down and consider more fully his latest business scheme. Yet when you look at the elderly Jacob, who won Pharaoh's respect when he blessed him in the royal court of Egypt in chapter 47, and compare him to the impetuous, conniving schemer of earlier days, you marvel at God's ability to work within such an unlikely man like Jacob who became a "prince with God" and began to show "godlike qualities" towards the end of his life.

Jacob's brother Esau warns us of the danger of living for the present. Today, Esau would be the media celebrity contrasting Jacob the mummy's boy. Sexual immorality, the dishonest deal on the side, the desire for material things that push the married couple into debt, despair and bankruptcy. Esau is every one of them and by recording his story, Genesis warns us not to allow our passions and appetite for today to blind us to the consequences for tomorrow and the eternal realities. As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 4:18, "what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal".

And what do we learn from Joseph and his brothers? Jealousy, treachery, rejection, betrayal, pain, loneliness and the plain unfairness of life. But also the transformation in the character of the brothers, as God uses Joseph as His instrument to lead his brothers through a life-changing experience of repentance and salvation. And most importantly in Joseph we have an example of faith: the faith that keeps us hanging on in there with nothing to see or encourage it but a love for God and a determination to stand fast when our world is collapsing around us. A faith that causes us to hold on to God's promise never to leave or forsake us, firmly believing that He has a plan and purpose for our lives and even the very trials are for our good.

So we take heart. The people we meet in Genesis are ordinary men and women, yet through them God did extraordinary things. This should teach us to believe that no matter how unimportant or insignificant we may feel we are, God loves us and has a plan and purpose for us. No matter how fearful or how world events may unfold, God is in charge. And gloriously, no matter how sinful and separated from God we feel we are, His salvation is available to us.