

THINK REFERENCE  
COLLECTION

# the bible

THINK FOR  
YOURSELF ABOUT  
WHAT'S INSIDE

**Written by General Editor Mark Tabb**



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## About the TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION isn't an ordinary set of reference books. Like all of the books in the TH1NK line, we wrote these books for students. That doesn't mean we inserted some hip language into an otherwise dry, boring book to try to make it sound with it and cool, dude. Instead, we built these books on a couple of assumptions about you.

First, we knew you want honest representations of various points of view. Although all the books in the REFERENCE COLLECTION are written from an evangelical Christian position, we didn't dismiss all other viewpoints. Instead, we wrote these books in such a way that those holding different world-views and theological perspectives would be able to read these books and say, *Yes, this gives a good outline of what I and others believe.* To assure theological balance, all of the books in this collection have been reviewed by a panel of scholars from various theological perspectives and academic fields (see page 271 for a list of those scholars).

We also believed you are able to draw your own conclusions. Whether the question regards what Buddhists believe or whether Christians can lose their salvation, we didn't connect all the dots for you. Each book presents several perspectives. You will have to take the next step on your own and figure out what you believe and why you believe it. Our goal is to do more than answer questions. The TH1NK REFERENCE COLLECTION

is designed to make you think through your own beliefs and convictions, as well as those of others.

Finally, we assumed you want something more than a place to turn for answers to your questions about Islam or Psalm 119 or the role of women in the church. That's why we designed these books to be read, not just used for research. You can read them from cover to cover. Along the way, you will find that these books not only dispense information but also entertain you and challenge you and the way you see your world.

*Mark Tabb*  
*General Editor*

# Introduction

Anytime you go someplace you've never been, it's always nice to have a seasoned traveler come alongside and help you get the most out of your visit. For most people, the Bible is an unfamiliar place. That's why we wrote this book for you: as a tour guide. Think of us as a friend riding along with you as you journey through the Bible. We're here to point out things you might otherwise overlook as well as answer some of your questions and keep you on track when you start feeling lost and overwhelmed. This book is by no means an exhaustive resource for all of your questions about the Bible. Instead, we are here to help you do something too few people ever do: Read the Bible for yourself, and think through what you've read. We've even provided a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the books of the Bible, which, if you follow it, will take you through the Bible in about a year.

## **WHAT IS IT?**

Before diving into the Bible, we need to cover some of the basics, and nothing is more basic than this question: What is the Bible? The word *bible* is simply a transliteration (that is, a word that was not translated into another language but transferred into it) of the Greek word that means “book.” We use it to refer to any book that contains indispensable information. The “birdwatcher’s bible” refers to a book no self-respecting birdwatcher should be without, while the “shooter’s bible” tells gun enthusiasts everything they must know about firearms.

The Bible is the original indispensable book. It was written by more than forty men over a period of more than a thousand years, beginning three thousand years ago. But what sets the Bible apart isn't its age, but its divine quality. When the men who wrote the Bible grabbed a pen and started writing, they didn't just pull words out of the air. Peter said, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21). This means God worked in the minds and spirits of the Bible's authors so they wrote precisely what he wanted written. Each book still reflects the personality of the human author. That doesn't take away from its inspiration. God chose particular people to be the authors of his Word. He made them, designing their personalities and putting them through unique life circumstances, all of which worked together to produce the volumes he wanted in print. When we pick up this book, we hold the literal Word of God. The actor Stephen Baldwin has perhaps the best answer for those who think this is impossible: "I think if God can create the universe he can write a book."<sup>1</sup>

Because God is ultimately the author of the Bible, it is completely trustworthy and true. His book is as reliable as he is. This means when the Bible says Jesus raised the dead back to life, he actually did it. If you could build a time machine and go back to the moment they rolled the stone away from Lazarus's tomb, you would hear Jesus tell him to get up with your own ears. And if you pressed your way through the crowd, you would see Lazarus, still wrapped up in burial cloths like a mummy, come walking out just as surely as you could watch John Hancock scribble his name on the Declaration of Independence if you could travel back to July 4, 1776.

Although the Bible is completely true, that doesn't mean some parts won't leave you scratching your head going, "Huh?" You won't have to wait long for some of these "huh?" moments. God arranged the Bible in such a way that you get hit with the biggest ones in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Check it out for yourself. Genesis 1 says God created light on day 1, sky and seas on day 2, and dry land and plants on day 3. But, and this will really blow your mind, he didn't create the sun, moon, and stars until day 4. If you don't ask yourself, *How on earth is that possible?* then you aren't paying attention. Genesis also says people lived seven, eight, even nine hundred years in the early days of human history. How is that possible? No one knows. However, our inability to understand how God did something does not mean the Bible is in error. This is where faith comes in. Believing in the absolute truthfulness of the Bible means believing that when and if all the facts come in, the Bible will be shown to be correct. When it comes to things like the lifespan of people prior to Noah's flood or miracles like Moses turning the Nile River into blood, we may never know how God did it. The important thing is, we know he did, without waiting for an explanation before we believe.

The Bible's divine nature also means we must obey it. This should go without saying. After all, what could possibly be more obvious than knowing we ought to do what God tells us to do since he is, in fact, God? That's like telling you it would be a good idea to cash your paycheck or that you shouldn't climb over the fence surrounding the tiger pit at the zoo. The authority of the Bible should be just as obvious. God, the Creator of the entire universe, the One who scooped up some dirt and made the human race, the One who designed you and laid out your life before you were ever born, has written a book. In that

book he tells you how you should live the life he designed. And he promises to change your life when you do what that book says. Call me crazy, but I think he just may know what he's talking about.

The Bible will introduce you to a new life system that will change everything about you. If you let it, it will reshape your values, your priorities, and the entire direction of your life. You will find commands in it and verses that tell you to do this or to not do that, but it has much more. Reading through the Bible will give you a whole new perspective on the world around you. This is called a biblical worldview, which simply means the Bible becomes the lens through which you interpret reality, as God's perspective becomes your own.

### **YEAH, BUT WHAT IS IT?**

The Bible is the indispensable book sent to us from God himself. But when we start to read this divine, authoritative, completely true book, we still don't know exactly what we are getting ourselves into. Is it the textbook for God 101, all the information about God you ever need to know? Is it the place to run for answers to all your questions about eternity? Some people call it the owner's manual for the human soul. Others see it as a treasure chest where we go to uncover pearls of truth to carry with us throughout the day. A recent television commercial referred to it as the instruction book for life. More than one pastor has held up a Bible and called it the rulebook for life. Do any of these really describe the Bible? Even if they don't, they describe the way most of us approach it. Maybe that's why reading it often feels like such a chore.

Think about it. When was the last time you curled up with a good textbook? As soon as a semester ends, most of us sell our

textbooks back to the college bookstore. If we do keep some, we never go back and read them for fun. Not if we're normal. Nor do we sit down and read our usual sources for answers to questions and problems for pleasure. Most computer programs come equipped with a "help" section we access by pressing F1. Do you ever press F1 for recreational reading? I didn't think so. And when was the last time you read the owner's manual for your car? Do you even know where it is? How often do you consult the instructions to putting anything together or the rules to Monopoly? Thinking of the Bible as a treasure chest filled with pearls of truth doesn't work either. Open the first page. Is it put together like any other collection of pithy sayings? No, not even close.

### **SO WHAT IS THIS BOOK WE CALL THE BIBLE?**

The first line in the first book gives us a clue. The Bible starts off, "In the beginning God. . . ." Whatever else this book may be, we know its central character is God. As you continue reading, you find God isn't described as some scientist would describe him, nor are all his character qualities cataloged like a theologian might do. Instead, as you read, you encounter God. He speaks and creates the world. Then he makes people and places them in the world. Yet God isn't far off from these people. He carries on conversations with them and spends time with them. Apparently that isn't enough for the people. They turn their backs on God and ignore what he says. And that's just the beginning.

This book starts off reading less like an encyclopedia or a textbook or an owner's manual than it does like a story. And the story keeps going as you continue turning the pages. Through the first five books, on through Joshua and Judges and Samuel

and Kings, and into the Prophets, the storyline continues to unfold. Even in the parts where the plotline seems to stop, you can still hear it. The book of Psalms is more than a collection of poems and songs. Each one expresses the heart cry of people in the middle of the unfolding drama of the story of God. I keep looking for something that approaches a God encyclopedia or a section filled with answers to all the critics' questions, but they're nowhere to be found. Instead, I find a true story that unfolds over the course of thousands of years. A story about God.

But what else would we expect to find? When you stand back and look at the Bible as a whole, you find one uniform story unfolding across its sixty-six books. Every part, every book, every psalm, every proverb, every letter, every prophecy, every law—all of it fits together to tell one story, the story of God. The Old Testament tells the first part of the story, and the New gives us part two. This story contains all the key elements you would expect to find in a great novel. One plotline goes from beginning to end, a plotline God has written not only in the Bible, but also across the pages of history. Within this plotline you find multifaceted characters and plot complications. Themes unfold across the storylines that help us understand the characters and plot. The various books within the Bible contain different writing styles and types of literature. Of course you find narratives, but you also find poetry and songs and proverbs and prophecies and letters. Some of the books talk about what happened, a few point to events that haven't yet taken place. All work together to tell God's story. But this true story isn't like any other ever written. We not only read it, we become a part of the drama.

So what is the Bible? It is the ultimate story, God's story. And what should you do with a good story? Read it, of course.

## DISCOVERING THE STORY

Stephen King once said that every good story begins with a question. The Bible, however, doesn't begin with a question. It begins with a statement: "In the beginning God. . . ." Yet this statement prompts a question in everyone who reads it, a question that is the single most important issue for every human being who has ever lived: Who is God?

The answer to this question unfolds through God's story, beginning with the Old Testament. The word *testament* means "covenant." A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties that obligates them to do certain things for one another. It's stronger than a contract. Think of wedding vows or a treaty between two nations. The Old Testament contains the covenants God made before the coming of Jesus (and tells what happened when God's people broke their vows), while the New Testament describes the covenant he made through his Son, a covenant that replaced all those that came before.

In the Old Testament God creates the world and hands it to the crowning point of his creation, human beings. The first two people, however, want something bigger and better. They want to be like God. Their disobedience separates the human race from God, plunging all of their descendants into spiritual darkness. Before sin enters the world, there is no question as to who God is. Afterward, the human heart becomes so dark and cold that no one knows. But God loves people too much to leave them in the dark forever. He reaches out to them to reestablish a relationship with them. However, this raises another question: How can sinful people live in the presence of a holy God?

These two questions drive the plot of the Old Testament. By the time you reach the end, you wonder if anyone can ever find

the answers. In spite of all of God's efforts to reveal himself to the human race, people continue to run after sin instead of God. Even the people God selects as his own chosen people worship gods made of wood and stone as often as they worship the God in heaven. Can anything be done to set things right between God and people? The answer to this question leads us to the New Testament. God reveals himself in a way he never has before, answering once and for all the question of who he might be. He does this through his Son, Jesus, God made flesh.

The best way to see all this unfold is to begin with the Old Testament, reading in the order in which the books appear in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> I know, here comes the first "Uhhh, what are you talking about?" The order of the Old Testament books in the typical Bible you pull off the shelf at a Christian bookstore isn't the same as in the days of Jesus. Jews in the time of Christ divided the Old Testament into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

The Law consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As the name suggests, they contain God's Law for his people embedded in a story about his relationship with them. Genesis tells how God creates the universe and the human race. It goes on to tell of his selection of a man and his wife, Abraham and Sarah, to grow into a nation through whom God will make himself known to the entire world. The rest of the books of the Law pick up the story after the descendants of these two people spend four hundred years living in Egypt, where they have become slaves. God sets them free and takes them to a land he promises to give them forever. Some of their descendants still live in that land today. Before God plants this nation in the land, he gives them detailed instructions for living in a close relationship with him.

The Prophets are made up of twenty-one books: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The last twelve are grouped together and called The Book of the Twelve. We know them today as the Minor Prophets, because the books are shorter than the other prophetic books. Joshua through 2 Kings are called the Former Prophets, for they tell the story of God's people after they move into the land God promised to give them. These books tell us *what* happened to God's nation of Israel, with a focus on those who speak for God in each generation. Isaiah through Malachi are known as the Latter Prophets. They cover the same historical period, but they tell us *why* Israel's history played out as it did.

The third group of books, the Writings, consists of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Some of these books are poetry, others contain songs. Ruth, Esther, and Daniel through 2 Chronicles tell stories. All thirteen books cover the same historical period as the Prophets, and all share a common characteristic. They show *how* people of faith responded both to the events around them and to God.<sup>3</sup>

Reading the Old Testament in this order not only allows you to see God's story unfold in a way you have never seen before, it also sets the stage for the New Testament. First and Second Chronicles, the last two books in the Hebrew Bible, look forward to God doing something new in the lives of his people who have suffered so long. Yet you come to the end unsure of what that new work might be. That is, until you turn the page and read the first page of the New Testament. Matthew begins

by recounting Abraham's descendants, much like the genealogies of 1 Chronicles at the end of the Old Testament. He then shows God's ultimate purpose in calling Abraham as he tells the story of the birth of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. Finally, all of the questions of the Old Testament are about to be answered.

### **CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD**

Reading God's story should be an interactive experience. Start your reading with prayer, and continue to talk to God as you read his Word. Listen for what each passage says about God, what it says about people, and how the two go together. Ask questions and dig deeper. Keep a notebook handy to record your thoughts. It can help you listen as God speaks. Again, we're reading a true story about real people in real situations. Put yourself in their positions. What do you think they felt and thought and feared? Could you have responded to God in the way they did? Keeping these kinds of questions at the forefront of your mind will help you truly immerse yourself in this story.

A final word of warning before you dive into the Bible: Some of what you will read will surprise you or trouble you or make you drop the Book and say, "What's *that* doing in the Bible?" God's story is much messier than the *VeggieTales* reenactments would lead you to believe. As you read, you will come across truths that will bring you comfort and others that will cause you to call the way you live your life into question. Expect to get excited over good news and to be made uncomfortable, and at times angry, by what sounds like bad news. You may even find yourself talking back to a page of the Bible saying, "I don't like this *one bit!*" Remember, the Bible is the

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story of a holy God reaching down to people who tell him to get lost. It reveals the true nature of the universe along with the real condition of the human heart. Because every word of it is true, how could we expect it to be all sunshine and puppies and daisies and warm fuzzies, when the world in which we live is anything but?

And now it's time for the tour to begin. Grab your Bible and let's go. We'll start in the books of the Law. These books set the stage for everything that follows. Then, in the Former Prophets, we'll discover how well God's people did in trying to live close to him. Next, we'll hear God's comments on that sorry story in the Latter Prophets. The first part of our journey ends with the Writings, as we listen to people struggling to live for God in a difficult world. The key question that runs through each of these major divisions of the Hebrew Bible—*How can sinful people live in an intimate relationship with a holy God?*—is never really answered. That's why there's part two of the story, the New Testament.

## 1

# The Law

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus,  
Numbers, Deuteronomy

**AUTHOR**

Moses

**WHEN WERE THESE BOOKS WRITTEN?**

During the forty years Israel wandered around in the wilderness, around 1400 BC.

**WHAT ARE THEY ABOUT?**

These five books cover the story of God from the creation of the world to the moment right before the people of Israel walk into the Promised Land (around 1400 BC). No other section of the Bible covers such a wide span of history. The section gets its name from the central feature of the five books: God's Law as given to Moses. The Law itself begins with the

Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and stretches through to the end of Deuteronomy. However, the section doesn't read like a legal document. Instead, the Law is interspersed with the story of God choosing a people, then leading them to a land he has prepared for them. It is the foundation for everything that follows in the Bible.

## Genesis

**Plot:** The book tells the story of creation, both of the universe and of the nation of Israel, the people through whom God chooses to reveal himself to the world. What will God do when the people he created to know him and love him reject him instead?

**Key characters:** God, Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph

**Turning points in the story:** Genesis 3; 12

## Exodus

**Plot:** Exodus tells how the people of Israel become slaves in Egypt and how God sets them free. Their time in Egypt allows them to grow into a nation of several million. The book also records the Ten Commandments and the first part of God's Law that governs how people can live in a relationship with him.

**Key characters:** Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, the people of Israel

**Turning point in the story:** Exodus 12

## Leviticus

**Plot:** Leviticus picks up where Exodus ends. It was written while the people of Israel were camped around Mount Sinai, the place where God gave them the Law. Leviticus

primarily focuses on how people can worship God. It details the sacrifices necessary to remove the offense of sin so that a relationship with God is possible.

**Key characters:** Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu

**Turning point in the story:** Leviticus 10

## Numbers

**Plot:** The book gets its name from the two censuses Moses takes of Israel in the wilderness. God takes the people to the Promised Land, but the people don't believe they can conquer the people who already live there in order to obtain it. So God sentences that generation to wander around in the desert until another generation grows up to take their place, a generation who believes God can do what he said.

**Key characters:** Moses, the twelve spies including Caleb and Joshua, Korah, Balaam

**Turning point in the story:** Numbers 13

## Deuteronomy

**Plot:** These are Moses' final words to the people he led for more than forty years as they stand poised to enter the Promised Land. The book gets its name from two Greek words that mean "the second giving of the Law." As its name implies, Moses gives the Law to the people a second time, telling them both how they are supposed to live in the land they are about to enter and how to live in the presence of a holy God.

**Key characters:** Moses, the new generation of Israel

**Turning point in the story:** Deuteronomy 34

## Genesis

The first generation always has the greatest influence over any movement or organization. This is especially true of the human race. The first generation opened the door through which every generation since has passed. We find both the very best and the very worst about ourselves in these chapters. This is perhaps the most important book in the entire Bible for understanding God, the state of the world, and human nature. Every theme found in the rest of Scripture first appears in Genesis. From who we are, to the depth of our depravity, to the power of God and the wonder of his grace, it can all be found here.

Genesis covers the largest span of time of all the books of the Bible, from the dawn of creation until Jacob and his family settle in Egypt (around 1800 BC). Some of the Bible's most memorable characters are found here, including Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the forefathers of the ethnic Jewish people and the spiritual fathers of all who believe.

### Genesis 1–3

The Creation account in Genesis doesn't tell us *how*, but *who*. God designs all that is and speaks it into existence. The only thing he doesn't speak into existence is you and me. In Genesis 2, God scoops up some dirt, shapes it into a man, pulls the man to his lips, and breathes into him the breath of life. He crafts man and woman in his own image, able to create, rule, and love. Their nature as God's image-bearers separates them from all the rest of creation.

These first few chapters also introduce us to the great dilemma that runs through the Bible. God creates people to

know him, to love him, to enjoy an intimate relationship with him as they enjoy the world he places them in. But he also gives them a choice about this relationship. They aren't robots programmed to love God. It doesn't take long for them to choose. Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, weigh their options and decide they would rather be like God than take a position of subservience. As a result, they die spiritually and later physically. Since sin cannot exist in the presence of a holy God, the Lord drives them away from himself. How can they ever be brought back? People have dug the gulf that separates God and mankind. How will God reestablish an intimate relationship with people who choose sin over him, and why would he? And how will people who fall in love with sin the day they first taste it ever be able to live without it?

### Genesis 4-7

Genesis 6 says, "The sons of God saw the beautiful women of the human race and took any they wanted as their wives." The offspring of these relationships are referred to as giants who became the heroes of the legends of old. Does this mean angels intermarry with human beings and produce some sort of angelic hybrid superhumans? No. Jesus says angels don't marry; that is, they are incapable of procreation (Matthew 22:30). If the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 aren't angels, the phrase probably refers to godly men from the line of Seth, who abandon all godly standards and marry whomever they wish. This is one of those passages where an exact understanding is not completely possible. The point, though, is clear. The human race plunges itself into the depths of sin, with sexual sin at the forefront. This makes God lose patience with the human race.

The identity of the giants is easier to pin down. The term translated “giants” in the New Living Translation literally means “the fallen ones” or “those who fall upon others,” that is, with violence. It refers to the men of renown, violent men who dominated all others. They are physically huge, especially in comparison with the average person. However, giant doesn’t mean the Jolly Green Giant. Think in terms of Shaq compared with the average human being. Goliath, the Philistine hero whom David kills in 1 Samuel, is nine feet tall in an era when the average Israelite is a little more than five feet tall. A similar ratio probably applies here in Genesis.

### **Genesis 8–11**

The key to understanding the tower of Babel story lies in 11:4, “Let’s build a great city . . . a monument to our greatness.” The tower is both a monument to the power of human ability and a means of uniting the entire human race. Why is this bad? They are united in exerting their greatness in opposition to God. Remember what just happened in the beginning of human history? People went from bad to worse and digressed into a state of total wickedness. If God leaves the people of Babel to themselves, history will immediately repeat itself.

### **Genesis 12–15**

The story of the Flood shows how there are no limits to human depravity. Yet no matter how bad people become, God still loves them. His plan for them remains. He longs to bring them back to himself. We see this in the mercy God shows when he saves the human race through Noah and the ark. Sadly, tasting God’s mercy and grace doesn’t change the pattern. After the Flood, people don’t change. Instead, they pool their efforts and attempt

to become like God, which sounds very much like the Garden of Eden all over again. Now what will God do? How can he establish a loving, intimate relationship with humankind, while still maintaining his justice and holiness? Will he ever find anyone on the earth whose heart will be completely his? The answers to these questions unfold in the next phase of the story, which introduces a man and his wife named Abram and Sarai.

### **Genesis 16–19**

Why are Abram and Sarai so important to God's story and his plan of salvation for the human race? From these two people, God will make a whole new nation, a new race of people, through whom he will reveal himself to the entire world. God's plan is to reveal himself to Abram and his descendants, both in actions and words. Abram and his descendants are then to tell the rest of the world about him. Enough generations have passed from Adam to Noah to show that no one will come to God on his own. Through Abram and Sarai and their descendants, God will now reveal himself in an unmistakable way. His goal is more than to get people to believe he exists. God wants all people to know him intimately and personally. Of course, this is impossible as long as we remain in our sin. More on that plot complication later. The rest of Genesis records the beginning of the nation descended from Abram and Sarai. There's only one problem. They're both old and childless. How can God build a nation from a man pushing a hundred and an old woman near ninety?

### **Genesis 20–26**

The story takes an unusual turn in chapter 22. At long last a child is born to Abraham and Sarah (Abram and Sarai renamed).

This child fulfills God's promises to them. Now Abraham is supposed to sacrifice this child. What on earth is God thinking? For more insight into this episode, see Hebrews 11:17-19. As you read these chapters, put yourself in the drama. How would you see God if you were Sarah? Or Hagar? Or Ishmael? Or Abraham? Put yourself in Isaac's place as he lies on top of the pile of wood waiting for his dad to kill him. How would this episode change your understanding of God?

Abraham sometimes pales in comparison with his son Isaac. As you read about his life, think about what he goes through when his father is about to sacrifice him in chapter 22. Abraham is more than one hundred years old. Isaac is a young man, probably in his early teens. If he wanted to, he could easily stop his father. He doesn't. Think about the faith he has to exercise, both in his father and in God. Keep this in mind as you read about how he obeys when God speaks.

### **Genesis 27-35**

Here Jacob steals his brother Esau's birthright and blessing, then runs for his life. Jacob knows sticking around greatly increases his odds of an unfortunate and potentially fatal accident. But his fear of Esau doesn't change Jacob's *modus operandi*. He keeps on dealing from the bottom of the deck in his interaction both with people and with God. And here's the really strange twist: This is the guy God chooses to be the vessel through whom the tribes of Israel will be born. Jacob is not the picture of godliness. His story introduces us to something mysterious and far beyond human comprehension, something we can only call grace.

As you read about Jacob and his sons, remember the Bible records the real lives of its characters. By doing so, God does not sanction everything they do. Jacob shows God works in and

through these people in spite of what they do and who they are. His story magnifies the wonder of God's mercy and grace.

### **Genesis 36–39**

Chapters 38–39 show the incredible contrast in character between Joseph and his brothers. Notice how Joseph and his brother Judah respond when tempted. Look at how each one handles sexual sin. One goes looking for the opportunity to give in; the other runs away when temptation is forced upon him. Could two men be any more different?

### **Genesis 40–50**

These chapters show God's incredible power and sovereignty, especially when it appears outwardly that he is far away. What hope would anyone have if Joseph had not been sold into slavery by his brothers and later put into prison unjustly by Potiphar? Also, how desperate must Pharaoh be to listen to a foreign prisoner?

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that God wants Jacob and his family to move to Egypt. Why? The answer lies in Genesis 43:32. The Egyptians despise the Hebrews. They won't even eat in the same room with them. Once Jacob's family moves to Egypt, there isn't much chance that they'll absorb into the local population. No Egyptian wants to intermarry with them. God isolates this group of seventy people until they grow into a large and distinct people. The only question will then be, after living in Egypt for a few hundred years, why would these people ever want to leave?

### **BEFORE YOU MOVE ON . . .**

By the end of Genesis, you have the makings of the new nation through whom God will make himself known to the entire

world. Yet a couple of problems stand in the way. First, there are only seventy people. And they live a long way from the land God promised to give them. Joseph is dead, but no one has hauled his body back to Canaan. They have put him in a coffin. Notice, they don't bury him. He's in a box, as though he doesn't want to settle for living in Egypt even though he is dead. Joseph protected Israel's descendants from the Egyptians. What will happen now that he's dead? And how can seventy people grow into a nation? And what will happen to the promises God made to Abraham since his descendants have put down roots in Egypt, not the Promised Land?

## Exodus

When Pharaoh invited Joseph's father and family to move to Egypt, he told them, "Don't worry about your belongings, for the best of all the land of Egypt shall be yours" (Genesis 45:20). In addition, Joseph made sure his extended family settled in Goshen, a fertile area perfect for raising sheep, cattle, and oxen.

After four hundred years of living there, the group of seventy has grown to several million, with more than six hundred thousand men twenty years of age and older. What can possibly motivate not just a handful of people, but the entire nation, to pull up stakes and move to a land they've never seen? Life has to be so bad, so horrible, they would all rather risk death than stay where they are. And that is exactly what you discover is everyday life in Egypt for Jacob's descendants. Four hundred years go by between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, approximately the same amount of time that passed from the time the last book of the Old Testament was written to the birth of Jesus. During this time, life takes some unexpected twists that prepare God's people for what he plans to do next.

### Exodus 1-5

Why does God threaten to kill Moses? To understand the answer, you need to think in terms of God's plan for Moses' life. Leading the Jews to freedom constitutes only a small part of God's purpose. God also plans to give his people his Law through Moses. Up to this time, the Hebrews know only two commands from God: Keep the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3), and circumcise all males (Genesis 17:9-14). How can Moses deliver God's Law to God's people when he hasn't kept the

small portion of the Law he already knows? Even after the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses didn't correct this oversight by getting circumcised. If Moses the lawgiver doesn't take God and his Word seriously, why will anyone else?

Why doesn't God tell Moses to ask for the slaves' freedom? Read the story carefully. Moses asks Pharaoh to allow the Hebrews to go on a three-day journey into the wilderness to worship the Lord (5:1). He never says anything about leaving and never coming back. To understand the answer you must also see the situation from God's perspective. God asks for a three-day worship trip, but once he completely destroys Egypt, Pharaoh wants them gone forever. Setting them free is Pharaoh's idea. God doesn't switch the price tags. Instead, once he shows his might to Egypt, the Egyptians don't want to mess with him or his people.

### **Exodus 6–8**

God's plagues have a dual purpose. First, they break the Egyptians and set his people free. But the Egyptians aren't the only audience. The Israelites aren't exactly the godliest of people. Many of them worship the Egyptian gods. Moses knows if he goes to the Israelites and declares, "God sent me," they will reply, "Which one?" Therefore, the plagues on Egypt are all aimed at showing the Israelites that the Lord alone is God. Perhaps that is why the first plague directly targets the Egyptians' favorite god: the river of life, the Nile. Note also how the first three plagues affect the entire land, including Goshen, where the Israelites live. But beginning with the fourth plague, gnats, God makes a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Egypt suffers, Israel is spared. God does this to show

both the Israelites and the Egyptians that these aren't random, natural events.

### **Exodus 9–12**

Verse 9:12 raises the question: Does Pharaoh have a choice? The verse says God hardens his heart, making him even more stubborn. Is that fair? Does God force him to act as he does? Read Romans 1:24,28 and 9:17-18 for the answers. Part of God's judgment is turning people over to the choices they make. God makes Pharaoh even more stubborn as a way of sealing his fate. He raises up this particular man for the express purpose of putting someone so stubborn on Egypt's throne that he won't surrender until the entire nation is destroyed and every false god discredited. Is God being fair by doing this? Very. And that's why this bothers most of us. Fair means giving someone what he deserves. When it comes to punishment, we don't want fairness. We prefer mercy, at least for ourselves. But Pharaoh doesn't receive mercy. God gives him what he deserves, a frightening prospect indeed.

### **Exodus 13–20**

How can the Israelites go from singing God's praises on the day they cross the Red Sea (chapter 15) to complaining that he's sent them into the desert to die less than a month later (16:3)? Before we throw rocks at them, we need to ask ourselves, *How often do I find myself doubting God and complaining about the way he is running my life?* We aren't as different from them as we would like to think.

Why do the Israelites take such an indirect route through the wilderness? God could take them on a direct and speedy route to the Promised Land. He could, but he knows they

aren't ready (13:17). Taking possession of the land will be a matter not of military superiority, but of faith. Just as God fought their battles against the Egyptians, he will fight against every other foe they face. Now, during their time in the wilderness, God wants to teach them to trust him. He also needs to give them his Law, by which they can live in a close relationship with him.

Finally, Jethro's statement in 18:11 is the key verse for understanding not only the plagues in Egypt but also all the battles that lie in Israel's future. Every battle is a battle between gods. When Israel fights against another nation, the question isn't which god is strongest, but which god is real. The Lord wants every person to come to the same realization that strikes Jethro as he says, "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly" (NIV).

## **Exodus 21–24**

As you read the Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments, notice how practical it is. The instructions God gives the people are to govern their everyday lives. That's why so many laws focus on how to get along with one another. Others deal with matters of cleanliness and disease. The first set of regulations immediately following the Ten Commandments focuses on rules governing slavery. They sound strange to our modern ears, and we wonder why God would even address this without simply condemning it outright. But to people who have just spent hundreds of years in slavery, this topic is probably front and center in their minds.

## **Exodus 25–31**

The tabernacle is more than an ancient equivalent of a church building. It's the place where God makes his presence known to

the people in a tangible way. That's why the Greek equivalent of the word *tabernacle* is used in the New Testament to describe Jesus' coming to earth. This movable structure reflects God's greatness and holiness and glory. The building instructions are also practical. After all, this tent has to last a very long time. That's why the roof is made of skins that repel water with a layer of goat's hair to insulate it.

In addition to providing a place for people to meet with him, God also gives them worship leaders who will lead them to himself. Don't think in terms of the praise teams we have in churches today. Instead, these worship leaders are selected to represent the people to God. That's why the rules for who can be priests, how they must conduct themselves, and even what they can wear are so important. The priests go into the tabernacle and stand before God to plead the people's case. They have to be holy, just as God is holy.

Everything in this section is important, but that doesn't mean it makes for stimulating reading. Don't worry if you find this more than a little boring. You aren't alone. Most people find this part of the Law less than exciting. Skimming is not a sin.

### **Exodus 32–33**

How can Aaron, Moses' own brother and the man who spoke for Moses to Pharaoh, now stand in front of a golden cow and say, "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt!"? And how can these people who watched the plagues destroy Egypt, and who walked through the Red Sea, and who ate manna every day, worship a golden cow instead of the Lord? And here's the real kicker: How can God take these people back and even make Aaron his high priest?

**Exodus 34–40**

Exodus 34:14 in the NLT captures the reason why God goes to all the trouble of setting apart this people for himself: “You must worship no other gods, but only the LORD, for he is a God who is passionate about his relationship with you.” All of the laws and rules and regulations may make God appear very narrow-minded. In truth, they show how wide a canyon our sin digs between us and God and why God reaches across it.

## Leviticus

Living in the wonder of God's grace poured out through Jesus, we often take our access to God for granted. You and I can boldly enter God's presence because Christ paved the way for us (Hebrews 10:19-20). The people Moses led out of Egypt don't have that privilege. Their sin still stands between them and God. How can it be moved out of the way? God provides a way through a system of sacrifices. The penalty for sin is death. Therefore, through the sacrifices, an animal's life is offered in place of the life of the worshiper. But not just any animal will do. God has very specific requirements, because ultimately, these sacrificial animals foreshadow what God's own Son will do on the cross.

The second half of Exodus and all of Leviticus are set on the plains surrounding Mount Sinai. After leading Israel through the Red Sea, God brings the people here. Moses goes up on the mountain to receive God's Law. When he comes down, the people stay put while they build the tabernacle and begin worshiping God in the way he requires. Only then will they be ready to head to the Promised Land.

### Leviticus 1-7

The book of Leviticus describes five types of sacrifices the people are to offer: burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. Each one is an enacted prayer that outwardly expresses what the worshipers feel in their hearts. When a worshiper offers a sheep or a goat on the altar, he is telling God, "The fate that is about to befall this animal is what I deserve for my sin." The burnt offering expresses a total dedication of oneself to God. The sin

and guilt offerings are given to gain forgiveness from God for sins committed unintentionally. The other two offerings, the grain offering and the peace offering, are ways for people to express their gratitude to God.

### **Leviticus 8-11**

Chapter 10 may sound harsh. As you read it, ask yourself, *What else should God have done?* He has just spent months detailing exactly how he must be approached. Now on the first day of worship in the tabernacle, by the newly ordained priests who are to lead the people into God's presence, two of the priests throw all of God's instructions out the window and do whatever they want. The incense they offer probably reflects the ways people worship idols in Egypt. If God simply lets this slide on the very first day, what will the future hold? Compare this passage to the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.

### **Leviticus 12-15**

Welcome to the part of the Law that will leave you saying, "I can't believe *that's* in the Bible!" Keep in mind, the people you're reading about live long before the invention of refrigeration or antibiotics or even the most rudimentary medicines. They also don't have running water or flush toilets or many of the basics of hygiene we take for granted. Illness and disease can spread through their population in an instant. Remember this as you read the rules regarding infectious skin diseases and clean and unclean animals. These chapters may not seem practical to you or me today, but to a group of several million living in tents while traveling through the desert three thousand years ago, these commands show how God is concerned about every aspect of life.

**Leviticus 16–23**

The key verse for this section is Leviticus 19:2: “You must be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” The word *holy* simply means to be set apart, to be different. The laws and commands in these chapters give the children of Israel practical instructions as to how they can be different from the people who don’t know God. Many of these laws confront wicked practices that are common in the land the Israelites are about to inhabit, including the practice of having sex with a temple prostitute as a way of insuring a bumper wheat crop the next season, or sacrificing children to appease an angry god. The Lord gives the holiness code of Leviticus as a way of protecting the Israelites from these practices that result in death.

Holiness has never been and can never be achieved by human effort. That’s why this section begins with instructions for the annual Day of Atonement, the day when the high priest offers a sacrifice for the sins of the people within the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. He enters the Holy of Holies and sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on top of the atonement cover that sits on top of the ark of the covenant. As a result, God’s wrath for their sins will be turned away. Romans 3:25 uses the same word for “atonement cover” or “mercy seat” to describe Christ. He is the one who took the punishment for our sins and turned away the wrath of God our sins deserved. He is our place of mercy, the ultimate fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, and the One who now makes us holy, setting us apart for God.

**Leviticus 24–27**

This section of Leviticus includes instructions for six annual festivals the people of Israel are to observe. The festivals are designed to remind them of all God had already done for them

as well as to call them to continue to trust in him daily. These six festivals essentially mean that every two months, they will come together for a special time of worship before God. The Lord does this to make sure they won't become so caught up in the day-to-day business of scratching out a living that they will forget why they are alive.

Chapter 25 describes one of the most radical aspects of God's Law, the Year of Jubilee. In the Year of Jubilee, all debts are supposed to be forgiven. In addition, all the land reverts to the families to whom it was originally given, and slaves are set free. The Year of Jubilee guarantees everyone a new start. It levels the playing field and prevents the radical accumulation of wealth at the expense of others. The year also makes permanent slavery impossible in Israel. Keeping the Year of Jubilee demands a great deal of faith, which is also part of God's plan. Every generation is thus reminded that God and God alone is their sole source of provision.