

## **Week 3 – Discovering God’s Plan for the World**

### **God has a Plan!**

The Bible is like a great drama, in five Acts. It tells the story of God, and God’s people. When we reach the interval – after Act Three – everything seems to be going wrong, and the situation seems hopeless. But by the time we get to the end, we can see that God has a plan for the world which is so wonderful, that we feel compelled to join in and play our own part, as the story continues ...

### **Act One – ‘In the Beginning’ [Genesis chapters 1-11]**

Act One sets the scene for all that follows. Out of darkness and emptiness, God creates the universe, the world, and everything in it; he fills it with life and goodness.

And God creates the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. He gives them a special responsibility to care for his creation, and to live in loving relationships with God and with each other.

But humans are weak, and give in to temptation. They rebel against God. Human sinfulness separates them from God, and allows corruption and evil to spread, as we see in the wickedness which comes before the Great Flood, in which only the creatures in Noah’s Ark are saved.

So Act One of the Bible shows us, with awful clarity, the fundamental problem of life as we experience it. The relationship between the one true God, his good creation, and ourselves, is constantly spoiled by human sin and disobedience. The rest of the Bible is the story of what God does to put that right.

### **Act Two – ‘The People and the Promise’ [Genesis 12 – Joshua]**

God begins in Act Two by creating a community who will be the source of renewal – his own people, Israel. He calls Abraham to be the founder of this people, and promises that if Abraham is faithful, his descendants will become a great nation: God will give them a new land of their own: and through them, all the world will be blessed.

And so it comes about. Reading of the wanderings, desperate mistakes, difficulties and dangers faced by the generations of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then Joseph, it seems impossible for God to keep his promises – but he does.

When the Israelites are living in misery in Egypt, God gives them a new leader, the great prophet Moses. God delivers them out of slavery in the Exodus; he guides and cares for them through forty years in the desert; he gives them his Law to live by; and Act Two ends with the Israelites’ entry into the promised land, and their victory in the many battles they fight under Joshua.

### **Act Three – ‘Triumph and Tragedy’ [Judges – Malachi]**

Act Three of the Bible tracks the history of the Israelites over the next eight hundred years. There are inspiring periods when they succeed in living God’s way, as shown to them by their first leaders, the Judges, and by prophets like Isaiah. But mostly Act Three is the very human story of the Israelites falling short of expectations.

The highlight of this era is the reign of their great King David, who unites all the tribes and all the lands into a single kingdom, and puts God at the centre of Israel’s government and national life. But even David turns out to be a deeply flawed human being, who does some terrible things, and suffers the consequences.

And after David, the Israelites go badly astray. They chase after power and wealth like other nations; they fight among themselves; the kingdom is divided in two; and fatally weakened, Israel in the north and then Judah in the south are conquered, and the people are taken into Exile in Babylon or scattered elsewhere. Although some are later able to return to Jerusalem, it’s never the future they’d longed for. Act Three of the Bible, which is the last part of the Old Testament, ends with the Israelites’ hopes still looking like a far-off dream.

Does this mean that God’s plan has failed? Not at all. God has laid the foundations for what is to come. But what the Old Testament drama shows us, is that human efforts will never save us, no matter how great they are. Only God can do that – in person.

### **Act Four – ‘God So Loved The World’ [Matthew, Mark, Luke & John’s Gospels]**

Act Four of the Bible is all about Jesus; God, in person, living among us on this earth; showing us – through his teaching about the kingdom, his love for people, his healing of their wounds, his taking hold of them and turning their lives round – showing us how God wants us for his own; how he longs to forgive us and embrace us; how he will do everything for us – even dying on a cross. And how the power of love is so great that death is not the end of the story, but only a new beginning; the start of a resurrection life which will never end.

So against the vast canvas of the world’s history, we can see that *Jesus is God’s answer to the world’s problems*. Only Jesus can fulfil our hearts’ deepest desires. And we too can come to know him ever more closely, if we put our faith in him, and accept the love that he offers us, freely and unconditionally.

### **Act Five – ‘The Power of the Spirit’ [Acts – Revelation]**

Act Five shows us where all this is leading – to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost, and the explosive growth of the Church, as the good news about Jesus spreads rapidly throughout the world – surviving terrible persecution at first, as God proves that the power of his love is far greater than any human power.

And now we see that the story of God and his people is our story too. When Jesus says, ‘Follow me,’ he is calling us; all that Jesus promises, he promises to us; and what he asks in return, he is asking from us.