

# hope in a despairing world

*Mark Meynell* overviews the Bible

If asked to explain how to sustain hope in our despairing world, I suspect few would respond with a potted summary of the Bible; and yet, according to the apostle Paul, that is precisely what we should do! He wrote about the Jewish Scriptures in these extraordinary terms:

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.<sup>1</sup>*

That is a provocative statement: the Jewish Scriptures were written for *us* with the clear intention of encouraging us to endure to the end; and you only endure to the end if you know what's at the end. But then

confidently knowing the story's end is precisely what Christian hope is all about.

## kingdom foundations

### a divine story

This is crucial: the Bible starts and ends with God. God, and not human beings, is the heart of the Bible. This will be true of every Bible study one ever does. So in Genesis 1, we see that all the initiatives to create and order are taken by the one, true living God – or as Francis Schaeffer called him, 'The God who is there'. He made the world and everything in it.<sup>2</sup>

This explains the Bible's selectivity. There is so much that we might wish was there – but the Bible was not written to answer all our questions, or to explain every detail of human history. It was written to teach us of God!

### a human story

Of course, this is not to say human beings are irrelevant. Far from it! We have an inherent relationship and value to God because he made us. So in Genesis 2, God creates, provides for, and relates intimately to the people he made. *Everything* that is good in life we have because of him. Furthermore, the Garden of Eden provides us with the

divinely established template for his creation purposes: he is forging a new kingdom of people.<sup>3</sup> The plan is

***God's people  
in God's place  
under God's rule.***

It is of course entirely possible to draw the biblical themes together in different ways. However, God's kingdom is one of the most significant, and it will form the basis for this article.

Of course, after Genesis 2, it doesn't take long for the Eden idyll to be shattered. The man and woman both doubt God's goodness. Notice the subtle distortions of God's instructions during the serpent's dialogue with the woman<sup>4</sup> leading to a flat denial of God's word. This rebellion against God inevitably leads to the breakdown of their relationship with God. But that was not the only relationship to be damaged. All human

relationships are profoundly affected (the sex war began in Genesis 3 not in the '60s!), as is our relationship with creation. From now on, all human beings are born out of Eden and revel in rebellion – what Bible calls sin. Sin is not about individual misdemeanours; it is about rejecting a relationship with our creator. However, the problem at the end of Genesis 3 is not so much our sin. Tragically, our problem is God. He is holy and must judge if there is to be any order and morality in the universe – hence the events of Genesis 3:14-24.

**a rescue story**

So far, so bad. God could easily have ended the story there. In the same shoes, we might well have done. However, God clearly did not give up – we've only covered the first 3 chapters of 66 different books! Genesis 1-3 is the explanatory prelude. The rest of the Bible unpacks God's plans to get the world out of our mess. From Genesis 3:15 onwards, there are hints that a very special individual is on his way – the 'serpent-crusher'.

The huge narrative arc from Genesis 4 to Revelation 19, then, for all its peaks and troughs,

triumphs and setbacks, along the way, is a rescue story. Its culmination will be a final judgment and righting of wrongs,<sup>5</sup> followed by a new creation of the world<sup>6</sup> and the vision of God the Father ruling with his Son surrounded by his people forever.<sup>7</sup> This is not so much Eden regained as Eden improved! It is a garden city that is even better than the perfection of Eden! The Bible's story is not circular but linear – it is going somewhere new:

***God's people restored to  
God's place under God's rule.***

In a nutshell, therefore, as God restores his kingdom, we can see four elements that make up the narrative structure of the Bible:

CREATION

REBELLION

RESCUE

NEW CREATION

The fascinating thing about these elements is that they are played out on the grandest as well as the smallest of levels. This summarises the sweep of

Genesis through to Revelation, just as it can point to the key moments in an individual believer's journey. Its implications for philosophical worldviews, medical ethics and personal discipleship (to name but three) are enormous.

**kingdom promises:  
abraham - the beginning  
(Genesis 12, 15, 17)**

A nomadic, well-to-do businessman had a good life in the heart of what is now Iraq. Suddenly, without even the

advice of a good travel agent, he ups sticks and carts his entourage thousands of miles round the Fertile Crescent. Why? The answer is as simple as it is important: because the living God made some promises: a God-given land,<sup>8</sup> a God-established nation<sup>9</sup> and a God-established covenant to govern them.<sup>10</sup> Most significantly, these promises were to have *global* impact.<sup>11</sup> Abraham's God is no parochial, private God – he is the cosmic creator with a global mission.

Things start slowly, though; one miraculous birth at a time. But by the end of Genesis, Abraham's descendants number 70. They hardly constitute a nation – but it's not bad going after four generations. The challenge lies in the fact that they are not living in God's promised place – they are in Egypt rather than Canaan – and they hardly live consistently under God's rule. Even Abraham had feet of clay.

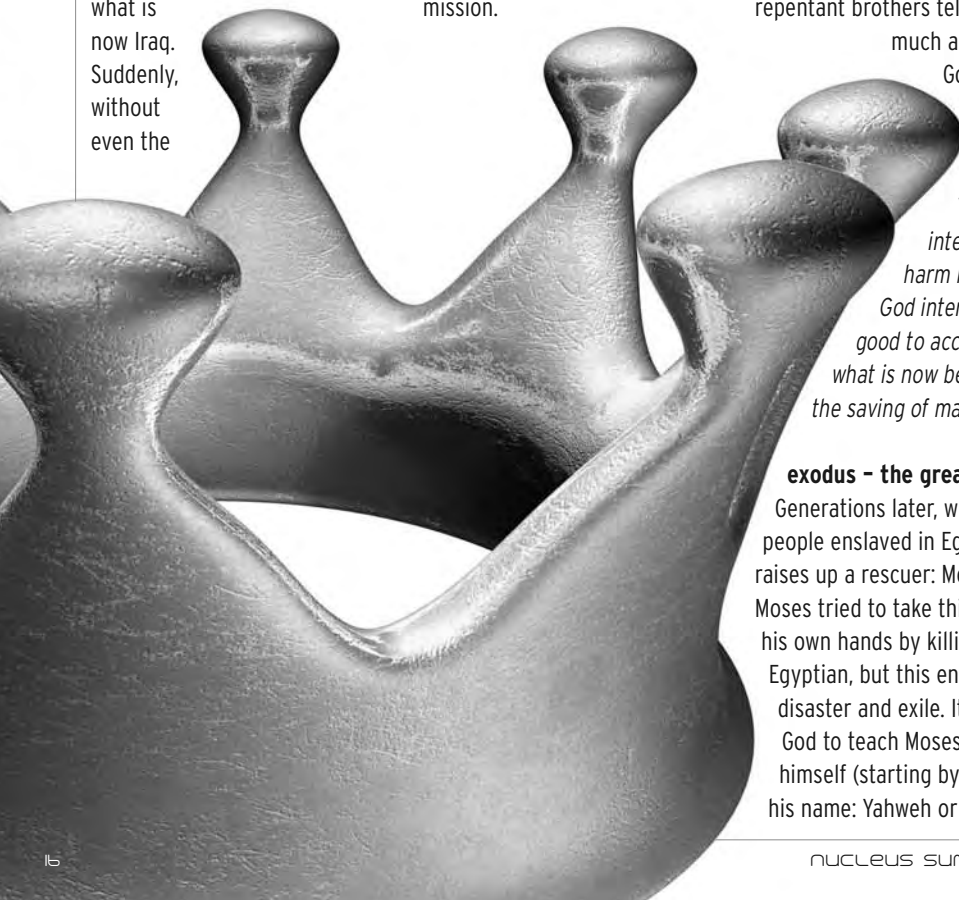
Still, what Joseph says to his repentant brothers tells us

much about how God works in his world:

*You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.<sup>12</sup>*

**exodus - the great escape**

Generations later, with the people enslaved in Egypt, God raises up a rescuer: Moses.<sup>13</sup> Moses tried to take things into his own hands by killing an Egyptian, but this ended in disaster and exile. It takes God to teach Moses about himself (starting by revealing his name: Yahweh or 'I Am')



and to rescue his people. Because God is also beginning to reveal his holiness, it becomes clear that he cannot be partial when he comes in judgment. This is why at the passover,<sup>14</sup> there is a death in every home. But for those who take Yahweh at his word, they will sacrifice an animal in the place of the first born son. Thus the pattern of rescue by substitution is established. That was only one half of the job: the people still needed rescue from Egypt as well. Hence the crossing of the Red Sea and the journey to Mount Sinai, where God had first met Moses at the burning bush.<sup>15</sup> Then at Sinai (also known as Horeb), Yahweh reveals how rescued people should live.<sup>16</sup> They are saved not by keeping the law, but for keeping the law.

Thus the journey to bring God's people to his place under his rule has begun. However, the journey is inevitably not straightforward. The first generation under Moses refuse to trust God's promise of the land. So God condemns them to a lifetime of nomadic desert existence. Their children, under Joshua, will be the ones to enter.<sup>17</sup> Yet again, God again is the only one who takes the initiative and the credit. After

all, no one could ever claim that blowing trumpets at city walls (as they did at Jericho) is a sound military tactic. Only Yahweh could do that.<sup>18</sup>

Victory depended entirely on taking God at his word. In other words, faith has always been the key to living for God.

### kingdom shadows

The subsequent Judges period was turbulent – the people repeatedly sank into rebellious idolatry but God graciously rescued them by raising up leaders (or 'judges'). In fact, this cycle repeated twelve times.

Eventually, we reach the time of the last judge and first prophet, Samuel, and the people's demand for a king. Despite the people's rebellious motives – they wanted to be like other nations<sup>19</sup> – establishing a monarchy was paradoxically integral to God's plan.

### the golden age: David & Solomon

After the false start of King Saul, David is the unlikely man for the job; not even his father thought he was up to it.<sup>20</sup> Yet, by 2 Samuel 7, the people are united, the capital established at Jerusalem and everything seems to be in place. However, there are still surprises;

through Nathan, God reveals there is still more to come.<sup>21</sup> God's Kingdom will be built around David's line and it will last forever! David's suggestion of a permanent temple for God is not in God's plan for him – but it is for his son Solomon (by Bathsheba of all people!) to dedicate one in 1 Kings 8. This is a glorious reminder of God's presence with his people.

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*David is the unlikely man for the job; not even his father thought he was up to it*

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Two chapters later<sup>22</sup> comes the climactic moment of the Old Testament. A pagan, African monarch (the Queen of Sheba) visits Solomon and is overwhelmed to the point of praising Yahweh for his purposes. Truly, God's people living in God's place under God's rule is a blessing to the nations (as personified by the Queen).

### the golden age: the not-so golden reality

The Bible will not allow a sanitised view of history, however. David had feet of clay (his adultery and act of murder were in some ways far worse

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than Saul's behaviour). Then as soon as the Queen of Sheba departs, we discover Solomon's true colours (despite his God-given wisdom). The irony is painful - after centuries of God getting the people out of Egypt, we find that Egypt is still within Israel, as epitomised by Solomon's marriage to

'writing' prophets had to minister. They explained that according to the covenant with Moses, expulsion from the land had always been a possibility.<sup>24</sup> Judgment should never have been a surprise to them. What was extraordinary was that God still had plans for them.

where?	northern	southern
Name	Israel / Ephraim	Judah
Capital	Samaria	Jerusalem
Key prophets	Elijah & Elisha (9th Century) Amos & Hosea (8th Century)	Isaiah (8th Century) Jeremiah & Ezekiel (7th / 6th C.)
Judgment	Falls in 722 BC to Assyria: 'the Lost Tribes'	Falls in 597 & 586 BC to Babylon Exile ends 538 BC

Pharaoh's daughter!<sup>23</sup> This leads to the worship of false gods – the ultimate kick in the teeth to the creator and rescuer God. Consequently, the kingdom is split in two under Solomon's successor Rehoboam, and the Northern kingdom is never again ruled by a Davidic king.

After both kingdoms are toppled, the obvious question is, 'where do God's promises stand now?' It was into this context that the so-called

### God's rescue – the prophetic promise of a new exodus

The scope of the prophetic hope is huge, which is why we can only highlight some elements here:

- A New Covenant: there is continuity (same God, same people, same purpose) and radical discontinuity (the law will now be written on people's hearts bringing total forgiveness and access to God).<sup>25</sup>

- A New Restored People<sup>26</sup>
- A New Temple<sup>27</sup>
- A New David<sup>28</sup>
- A New Sacrifice<sup>29</sup>
- A New Creation<sup>30</sup>

It would take an almost impossible leap of imagination to foresee that the vision of a Davidic king called 'Mighty God' and 'Everlasting Father'<sup>31</sup> should be combined with that of the suffering servant who presents *himself* as a sacrifice for sin.<sup>32</sup> Yet that is precisely what

**kingdom coming  
the gospels:  
the king has come**

Matthew opens his gospel with a genealogy. For many, the Bible's genealogies are its least exciting components – and yet for the gospel

scriptures (the Old Testament).<sup>35</sup>

For all the many breathtaking things he did, like preaching, healing and exorcism, the heart of his mission lay in his obedience to

happens when we get to the New Testament. Perhaps the serpent-crusher is still on his way?

After the Persian empire under King Cyrus sends the exiles home,<sup>33</sup> the people trickle back. What they rebuild, however, is a mere shadow of past glories rather than the expected upgrades and improvements on the old way of life. Those who could remember were bitterly disappointed<sup>34</sup> and the post-Exile prophets like Malachi and Zechariah have to preach a depressingly similar message to that of their pre-Exilic counterparts. The people have not changed much, and so the Old Testament ends without resolution.

writers, they were thrilling and decisive. In fact, after Matthew 1 and Luke 3, there are no more genealogies in Scripture. Their job is done. For the king is here, and his people will not be drawn from those racially connected to him, but from those connected by faith.

Jesus is descended from Adam (and therefore human, of course), Abraham (and therefore Jewish) and from David (and therefore royal). Everything about him – his character, his actions, his teaching and above all his mission – is governed by and understood through the

the Father at the end of his life. As he predicted at least three times<sup>36</sup> and explained on the Emmaus Road,<sup>37</sup> Jesus had come to die on a cross and then rise again. The Davidic King had come to be the Temple Sacrifice and Passover Lamb.<sup>38</sup> He had come to die as a substitutionary sacrifice in order that sinful people might have access to God. Only this would reverse the tragedy of the Fall.

*Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*<sup>39</sup>

**acts: kingdom spreads**

After Jesus' ascension, Peter preaches to Jews from all over the then known world in Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> Within days, the church is numbering thousands. As Luke tells the story in Acts, God spreads his message far and wide, from Jerusalem to Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world.<sup>41</sup>

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*through Jesus  
we will be reunited  
to the Father who  
made us*

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Luke's focus is primarily on Peter and Paul (with cameos from Stephen and Philip) – but we are meant to imagine that all the others are involved in extending the kingdom, as the gospel ripples out from the epicentre in Jerusalem. Within weeks, these first Christians are grappling with the challenges of reaching out to and then integrating Gentiles<sup>42</sup> into what is fast becoming a trans-cultural phenomenon.

**epistles:**

**living in the now and not yet**

Summarising the impact of the New Testament letters is difficult. They are as diverse as the men who wrote them. However, it is

possible to say this: they guide and lead the early church as she grapples with the challenge of being subjects and co-heirs of God's kingdom in a hostile world and culture. By God's Spirit, believers are grounded, equipped and sustained in the marathon that is the Christian life – and the letters help them along the way.

This challenge is epitomised by Romans 8, where Paul explains the joys and confidence we have as Christians (eg no condemnation, having the Spirit of Christ, assurance of nothing separating us from Christ), together with the frustrations and sufferings that derive from divine promises as yet unfulfilled.

The crucial thing is that this is no indefinite state or endless cycle. The moment when all God's kingdom promises will be consummated is on its way.

**kingdom forever**

In Revelation 21-22, the story ends – or rather just begins! For the whole point is that God's people now live for eternity in the presence of God, unencumbered by sin because of Christ. All that stood in hostile opposition to God has been condemned and expelled



(hence there is no sea, a Hebraic metaphor for chaos and rebellion). All that is God's is renewed and restored. The New Jerusalem comes *down* to earth and all inhabitants enjoy the wonders of Eden as illustrated by the Trees of Life.

The key, though, lies in what is central to the vision: Jesus the Lion and the Lamb (the King and Sacrifice). It is through him, by the Spirit, that we are reunited to the Father who made us – and that is why

eternity will be spent in joyful praise and service of the great God of the cosmos.

It is this hope that uniquely pierces through the despair of our world and generation. The Bible demonstrates, over centuries, God's track record in making and then keeping promises. It illustrates repeatedly how human sin will never throw God off course. It encourages us that trusting God is always the best way to live in the end.

*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving towards all he has made.*<sup>43</sup>

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