

Lesson 4

- The diversity of the bible
- After the flood
- God the Father

Lesson 4a

The diversity of the bible

As we saw in the last lesson, God used many different authors to write down his words. The way in which God wanted his messages to be written down also varied. That is why there are so many different types of books in the bible: law books, history books, psalms, prophecies and letters. All the different authors had their own styles and their own use of words. The result is a great diversity within the bible.

The variation in the bible

When God makes himself known to us and gives us his promises and laws, He does so in a variety of different ways. In this lesson we will look at some aspects of this variety.

Historical accounts

A large part of the bible consists of historical accounts. These parts describe events in the history of God and his people Israel. When we read this history we have to keep in mind that it is not just the history itself that is important. The bible is no ordinary history book.

Compared to an ordinary history book it might seem that the bible omits large parts of history. However, rather than the history of a people or nation, the bible tells the history of the salvation of man.

We do find a lot of historical facts in the bible but what we do find has been selected by God to represent the history of salvation. The way in which the bible tells history, points out the necessity of salvation for man.

In the very beginning of the bible we read of God's promise to save man from the power of Satan. From what follows we see how God keeps this promise despite all the difficulties that He encounters in his relationship with man.

To make the message of the necessity of salvation clear, God recorded not just the good times, but also the bad times in the history of his people. The Israelites often forget about God.

The kings of Israel who were supposed to be a good example do not take God into account. The mistakes people make are exposed for everyone to see rather than hidden. This method of writing history makes it clear that it was only through God that salvation could come into the world.

Not only in the historical books do we see this emphasis on the salvation of man. In the gospels we read very little about Jesus' youth but a great deal about the very short period in which He explained why He was to come to the earth. For us it is endlessly more important to know what Jesus did for our salvation than for example with whom He spent his time when He was young.

Poetry

Some books of the bible have been written in poetry or form a collection of poems. The book of Psalms is the best-known example. Hebrew poetry does not use rhyme but rather rhythm or metre. Another feature is the use of parallelism: two very similar or directly opposing lines following one another:

Psalms 1:5

*'Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous'*

Or:

Psalms 1:6

*'For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish'*

Another feature of the Psalms is the use of choruses: lines that are repeated over and over again. We see an example in Psalm 118:

'His love endures forever'

Some Psalms are alphabetical poems. The first letters of their lines or stanzas form the alphabet. An example is Psalm 119. Unfortunately, in the English translation this poetic form has been lost.

The poets of the Psalms also use a lot of imagery; they use an image to convey their message. Personification of objects is an example of this. We read for example about:

- Mountains that are jealous of one another
- Hills that burst out in praise
- Water that calls out
- Gates that lift up their heads

The book of Job is one of the other poetic books and also uses a lot of imagery, especially to express the smallness of man in comparison to God:

*'Does the rain have a father?
Who fathers the drops of dew?
From whose womb comes the ice?
Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens
When the waters become hard as stone,
When the surface of the deep is frozen.
Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?
Can you loose the cords of Orion?
Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons
Or lead out the Bear with its cubs?
Do you know the laws of the heavens?
Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?
Can you raise your voice to the clouds
And cover yourself with a flood of water?
Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?
Do they report to you, 'Here we are?'
Who endowed the heart with wisdom
Or gave understanding to the mind?
Who has wisdom to count the clouds?
Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens
When the dust becomes hard
And the clods of earth stick together?'*
Job 38:28-38

Psalms 5:1-2

Because of its amazing use of imagery, the book of Job is regarded one of the greatest works of poetry in world literature.

Lessons for life

The book of Proverbs is written in a completely different style. It is made up of proverbs that contain wisdom of life.

*'My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
Listen well to my words of insight,
That you may maintain discretion
And your lips may preserve knowledge'.*

The reader is given practical advice that will teach him how to go through life.

Proverbs
20:17-19

*'Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
But he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.
Make plans by seeking advice;
If you wage war, obtain guidance.
A gossip betrays a confidence;
So avoid a man who talks too much'.*

Prophecies

In the last books of the Old Testament we find prophecies, messages from God to his people concerning the future. Sometimes the messages bring good news about the salvation that God will bring to his people.

Many prophecies are prophecies of judgement. It tells the people of God who are not listening to Him, that they need to return to their Lord. The men who bring these prophecies do not speak their own words, but the words of God and their messages are often very unsettling. Their messages with words like: 'These are the words of the LORD'.

The prophets also use a lot of imagery. The prophet Amos says about the royal house of David:

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Amos 9:11

*'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent.
I will repair its broken places,
Restore its ruins,
And build it as it used to be'*

Amos has a sad message about the house of David. There will be a time when there will be very little left of the royal line. He compares the royal house to a fallen tent. At the same time God promises that a time will come when He will restore the house of David and renew its power. When David's descendant Jesus is born, the royal line will be restored.

Parables

Jesus often uses parables to explain his audience what He means. A parable is a story from daily life that conveys a deeper message. At times it takes some reflection to understand what Jesus' message is in a parable.

Laws

There are certain books in the bible that contain laws, for example, Exodus and Deuteronomy. In these laws God teaches Israel how to serve Him and to relate to one another.

Letters

The New Testament contains a lot of letters. These letters give a further explanation of the message of Jesus and lay out some rules and regulations for life within the community of the church.

The bible is not a difficult book

God included a wide variety of style in the bible. However, this does not mean that the bible has become difficult to read. It contains a lot that is easy to understand for anyone. Other parts require some study, but even those parts are not exclusively accessible to educated people. Anyone can hear the voice of God speaking through the bible. When we read

the bible with motivation and love and we pray God to give us insight, all of us can understand what God wants to say to us.

Questions

1. Explain the difference between an ordinary history book and the history of salvation as we read it in the bible.
2. Explain in your own words what the imagery in Job 38:28-38 means.

Lesson 4b

After the flood

God used the flood to wash the world. However, man's wickedness did not disappear. It even shows in Noah's own family with his youngest son going off the rails.

Noah and his sons

Read: Genesis 9:18-29

Noah becomes a farmer. He plants a vineyard and makes wine from its grapes. One day he drinks too much. He is so drunk that he is no longer aware of what he is doing. He takes off his clothes and falls asleep naked in his tent. Anyone who will come in will be able to see him.

Noah loses his dignity, which is bad enough. However, his youngest son Ham, makes it worse. He enters his father's tent. When he sees his father, he does not turn around. On the contrary, he scorns and despises him. Instead of making sure that no one else will see his father in this state, he calls his brothers Shem and Japheth. He wants them to come in and look. He is trying to increase his father's shame.

Noah's oldest son Shem reacts differently than Ham expected. He takes a cloak and together with Japheth he takes it to his father's tent. While they hold the cloak between them they enter the tent backwards and cover their father without looking at him. Then they leave the tent and let their father sleep off his drunkenness. They show respect for their father. What Ham, Shem and Japheth have done has great consequences. When Noah hears what happened, he has a message for them in the name of God.

God will punish Ham, who scorned his father. The people who will descend from Ham's son Canaan, will be servants of the descendants of Shem. The people who will descend from Shem and Japheth will prosper.

We know from different passages in the bible that Shem will become the ancestor of the promised Saviour. God continues his relationship with the descendants of Shem as we will see in the rest of the book of Genesis.

A city and a tower

Read: Genesis 11:1-9

Noah's family now all live together in the mountains where the arc was stranded. They start off as a small group of people. However, the group rapidly grows until they are too many to remain in the mountain area and together they move to the southeast, to the great plains of Shinar.

Shinar is a very fertile area located between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. It is very suitable for agriculture and moreover, the people discover that from the clay on the riverbanks they can make bricks. A type of tarmac can be used as cement. With this the people start to build stone houses. The people want to stay in this land forever. However, they have one problem. The population has grown enormously and they are afraid that they will lose track of one another when they spread out over the earth.

The people decide to build a city. In the city they want to build an enormous tower. It has to be high enough to reach the clouds. It will be a big project, but once it is finished everyone will be able to see the tower wherever he is. The tower will be their landmark and their unity will thus be secured. The people want to establish a name by building the tower. They want to become famous. It will be a monument throughout the ages to remind people of the greatness of their ancestors.

A bad project

The building project of the tower is not innocent. By making the tower people want to show that they do not need God.

The people do not involve God in their plans at all. God wants all people to honour and worship Him. In everything they do they need to be focussed on Him. However, building the tower has nothing to do with the honour of God. It is all about the people's own power and about the glory they themselves will receive from it.

God had given the people a command. After the flood he had told them: '*fill the earth*'. He wanted people to spread out over the earth. However, the people ignore this command. Their desire to build the tower and stay together shows how they do not want listen to God.

God brings the unity to an end

While the people are busy building their tower, God comes down to the earth. He wants to have a look at their mighty building. God does not need to descend to the earth because from heaven He can see everything man does and thinks. However, the way it is describes shows how little the tower means to God. The tower was supposed to reach into heaven, but God needs to come down to the earth to see it. When God sees the tower, He says to himself:

Genesis 11:6

'If as one people, speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them'

This does not mean that God is afraid of man's power. God has made man. How could he form a threat? It means that God is worried about the direction man has chosen to take. They are doing the same as the people before the flood. Just like then there seems to be no distance between the people who belong to God and the people on Satan's side. The descendants of Shem and Japheth are building a city and a tower together with the descendants of Ham. In their unity they ignore God. It seems the line that God is drawing toward the promised Saviour, will be a dead end.

God breaks the unity of the people to save them from becoming as wicked as the people before the flood. He takes

away the means that has kept them together so far, their common language. God causes them to speak all sorts of different languages so that they no longer understand one another. Obviously, it has now become impossible for them to work together in unity. The building project has to come to a halt.

People look for others who speak the same language and they move away from the plain in their groups, exactly what they had tried to prevent by building the tower. The city of their pride is given the name Babel: 'confusion'.

We can find the name Babel in many different places in the bible. The name becomes a term for rebellion. Sometimes the bible calls another city Babel or Babylon. This is always very negative and stands for rebellion against God. In a city or a world that is called Babel, man is the centre of attention and there is no room for God. It means a sad end for the people who live there.

Is God against unity?

When you read this history, you might start to wonder if God is opposed to unity. Is it against God's will when peoples live together in unity? Is God opposed to the United Nations or the European Union?

It would not be fair to draw this conclusion from these passages. God is not opposed to peace and unity. In the bible we read how God wants peoples to live together in peace. However, God is opposed to a wrong unity like the one in Babel. Unity should not lead to a life without God.

The great trek

After the building project of the tower has been ended, the people move away in groups. In Genesis 10 we can read where they settle. Japheth's descendants move to the coastal areas. Probably this means present-day Turkey, Greece, Italy and Spain. The descendants of Ham move to the area of present-day Israel, Egypt and northern Africa. Shem's

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descendants move to the area of present-day Iraq and Saudi-Arabia.

This way God makes sure that mankind is divided into different peoples. There is no longer one mighty empire, but several different empires that will keep control of one another. Man's effort to form a unity that excludes God has failed.

God does not forget about his promise

Unfortunately, God's interference does not cause man to repent and worship Him. On the contrary, most of the people rapidly forget about God.

They invent their own gods and start to worship objects like the sun or the moon. For every necessity they invent a god: a god of fertility, of rain, of a good harvest, etc. The bible often calls these gods idols.

It is an enormous insult to God that man decides to trust these idols. He made sun and moon and only He can give rain, fertility or a good harvest. God made man and makes sure he has everything he needs for his every day life. He deserves love, gratefulness and worship from man. Nevertheless, man turns his back on God and lives as if He did not exist.

God has every reason to turn his back on man. However, He does not. He promised that He would send them a Saviour to deliver them from the power of Satan and death and He continues to work on this promise. We can tell from the passage that follows the history of the tower of Babel.

Shem to Abram

Read: Genesis 11:10-32

This passage is a genealogy. It starts with Noah's son Shem and tells us who his descendants are until we come to a man called Abram.

Most of the names in this list do not mean a lot to us. However, it does show us that there is a line of people descending from

Shem who know God and want to worship Him. God takes care of this and for that reason the passage is important. The line seems to finish with Abram. One reason is infertility. Abram and his wife Sarai cannot have children. Another reason is because also the descendants of Shem become unfaithful to God. In the book of Joshua we read that they start to worship other gods.

Shem's descendants who are listed in this passage live in Ur, a city in present-day Iraq. We know from archaeological research that in that time Ur was a prosperous city with a rich culture. Religion plays an important part, although they do not worship God but idols, especially the moon.

The worship of idols is so attractive that also Abram and Sarai's family join in. The bible does not say whether they themselves worshiped the idols of Ur. We do know from the bible that Ur is a dangerous city. The people who belong to God find it hard to resist the temptation of worshipping idols.

God makes a new start

We saw how the line from Shem seems to reach its end both through infertility and the unfaithfulness towards God.

However, God decides to act. He causes Terah and his family to leave Ur. Together with Abram and Sarai and his grandson Lot he moves to Haran, an important trade centre on the banks of the river Euphrates. The family stays there for a while.

God takes a few of Shem's offspring away from their dangerous environment. He takes them away from their family and their friends who might tempt them into the worship of idols. In the next lesson we will see how God's plan evolves.

Questions

1. Why did the people built a tower?
2. Why was this a bad thing to do?
3. When everyone again turned their backs on God, He had every reason to send a new flood over the earth to punish them. Why did He not do so? Look up Genesis 8:21-22 and Ezekiel 18:23.

Lesson 4c God the Father

In the next lessons of the c-series we will discuss the different articles of the Apostolic Creed one by one. In this lesson we will start with the first article: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth'.

I believe

The Apostolic Creed begins with the words 'I believe in God'. The word 'believe' is nowadays often used to express an uncertainty. However, in the creed it is used differently. When it says: 'I believe in God', we mean 'I know that God exists, I trust in God'. The word 'believe' has nothing to do with uncertainty, on the contrary, it means: 'I am completely sure'.

I believe in God the Father

The creed starts with the words 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth'. This passage is about God the Father as opposed to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit.

God the Father is not only the father of Jesus Christ, He also wants to be our father. Because of what Jesus has done, He wants to regard us as his children.

When we accept God as our father, that believe becomes a stronghold in our lives. The knowledge that our lives are not led by fate but by our Father, gives peace. He wants the best for us. We do not need to worry about the future. Even when He allows us to go through difficult times, He has a purpose. He will make sure that pain and sorrow will be shaped into good things.

Almighty

The creed says that God the Father is Almighty. He has endless power. We discussed this in lesson 1c. The whole bible shows that God is almighty. There are numerous passages that praise God for his power. One example is Isaiah

Isaiah 40:12,
14-15,17-18

40. The message was originally for the Israelites who had to live in exile* in a certain period of history. Not one of them believed in the possibility of ever returning to Israel. But then God told them that He would bring them back to their own land. The Israelites refused to believe it and then the man who brought God's message reminded them of God's power and might:

*'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
Or with the breath of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
Or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a
balance?*

(...)

*Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
And who taught him the right way?*

(...)

*Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
They are regarded as dust on the scales;
He weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.*

(...)

*Before him all the nations are as nothing;
They are regarded by him as worthless
And less than nothing.*

*To whom, then, will you compare God?
What image will you compare him to?*

God is endlessly big and powerful. Nevertheless, He does not overlook people. He is concerned about them. The Israelites were reminded of that during their time in exile. God wanted to use his enormous power to save them and to bring them back to their own country.

We should also know that God is concerned about us. God uses his enormous power to save people from Satan's power. He uses his power to change them and to give them back their love for Him. He works in people to enable them to regard Him as their God, as their spiritual Father.

Creator of heaven and earth

The next thing the creed says about God the Father is that He is the Creator of heaven and earth.

For many people today it is incredible to believe that God would have made the heaven and the earth. Many people regard the first few chapters of the bible as a myth or a fable. How is it possible for today's Christians to believe that the book of Genesis gives a reliable historical account? Have they never heard of the evolution theory?

Obviously, Christians do know how scientists view the origin of the universe and of life. However, they also know that science will never be able to prove that God has not made the universe. The evolution theory has no proof and is founded on presuppositions. It is an assumption that the universe and life have come into existence through a series of coincidences. Why would that theory be probable?

For the first time in their lives, two people see a watch. They pick it up and look at what it is and how it works. One says: 'Obviously, somebody has thought about this. This is a complex object and someone must have purposely designed it'. The other person says: 'No, this object has come into existence in the course of the years. The little radars came first and incidentally, they have come in touch with each other. After millions of years a face came into existence with twelve numbers in regular intervals written along its rim. Millions of years later, a glass front appeared and even a leather strap. Then, again after millions of years the whole thing started to indicate time'.

This example shows that there are two different ways to think about the universe. When you see the stars, the earth, the plants, animals and people around you, you might think that such complexity can only exist because of a brilliant mind, God's mind. Or you can think that it has to be the result of millions of years of coincidences.

The first opinion is faith. There is no proof that everything has been made by God. Even if Christians are sure of the truth of the bible, they have no absolute proof for it.

The second opinion, the evolution theory, is also faith. There is no proof for any evolution theory either. There is no reason for Christians to think the bible is unreliable and choose to believe in an evolution theory.

This does not mean that Christians know exactly how everything has come into existence. The bible tells us that God made the heaven and the earth, but it does not tell us how He did it. God does not provide a scientific report. He only tells us what we need to know: He made everything. He spoke and it came to be. Everything He made was good.

God reigns

God created the earth, but He did not leave it at that. He personally makes sure that the creation is sustained. He has built rules and laws into creation. Through these laws He makes sure, for example, that day and night will always alternate at set times and the seasons will always follow one another and that in spring everything will start growing again. All these things do not happen automatically; God has caused it to be so.

God's care for the creation even goes beyond all of this. He reigns over heaven and earth. That implies not only that He has the final word over everything and everyone, it implies moreover that everything happens exactly the way He wants. In our world nothing happens outside his will. God is in control of everything.

Jonah

The bible very clearly shows that God indeed rules over everything. Let's look at an example. In the time of the Old Testament God decides one day to send an Israelite man named Jonah to Nineveh, a great foreign city. The evil behaviour of its inhabitants has become intolerable to God. Jonah has to warn the people of Nineveh that if they do not change their ways, God will punish them. However, Jonah is

not very keen on this mission. Instead of heading for Nineveh, he boards a ship that goes in exactly the opposite direction.

This way he hopes to escape his duty.

Jonah's plan fails. God causes a violent storm to rise and the ship is in danger. Jonah understands that it must be God who has sent the storm and he asks the crew on the ship to throw him overboard. He knows that will bring an end to the storm.

The crew is hesitant but eventually there is no option for them but to throw Jonah overboard. The very moment they do so, the wind is subdued. God causes Jonah not to drown but to be swallowed by an enormous fish and to be spat out on the beach three days later. Jonah is back where he started. When God asks him again to go to Nineveh, he goes.

The history of Jonah is one of many that show God's power over all things. People, forces of nature, animals, are all under his authority.

God and suffering

A question that might come up when we think about God's reign over the world is: how can there be suffering in the world when God rules over all things? What is God's role when it comes to floods, wars, famine and diseases like Aids?

This is a difficult question. It is understandable that many people today refuse to believe that God is almighty. They think God lacks the power to do something about these horrendous things that happen. He suffers along with his creation.

However, the bible shows us very clearly that this is not the case. It tells us that God is almighty and that He is in charge of world history. Nothing happens outside of his will. He can allow us to become seriously ill. He can allow one country to attack another.

This does not mean to say that God is cruel. On the contrary, He is good and just in all He does. When He allows people to suffer He does not do so because He delights in their pain of sorrow. But why then does He allow it? We will try to make it a bit clearer by looking at some examples from the bible.

What the bible says about suffering

There can be very different reasons for suffering:

- A punishment for sin. The bible tells us how God sometimes brings severe punishment on people who turn their backs on Him and do not want to listen to warning. In lesson 3b we saw how God punished people with the flood after they continued to ignore Him for a long time.
- A call to return to God. We often read in the bible how God causes his people Israel to be attacked by other nations. This happens when the Israelites abandon their relationship with God after many warnings. By allowing his people to be attacked God wants to remind them that they need to return to Him. He wants his people to understand that things will go wrong without Him. The punishment is a result of God's love for his people. He wants to call them back to himself because only He can give life.
- A test of faith. God can allow people who belong to Him to go through suffering to test their faith. God wants to see whether their faith is real, whether it will be strong enough to endure hardship. God promises that such a test will not be beyond people's strength. If they trust in God, the test will make their faith stronger.
- An instrument to reach others. Sometimes people who belong to God need to suffer in order to be able to reach others with the good news about Jesus Christ. Paul, a Christian who had to go to prison several times for sharing his faith in Jesus, writes in the New Testament that his imprisonment has been of great use. Because of it, many people who were involved in the courts of justice have been able to hear about Jesus Christ.

These are only a few reasons why God can allow suffering to happen. The bible mentions more. At the same time we learn from the bible that it will not always be clear to us why people have to go through hardship.

God the Father

God's reign over the world is often compared to a great work of embroidery. As people we only see the back, the chaos of loose ends with no apparent pattern to it. But one day when we are allowed to see the front we will understand why those threads were necessary to create a work of beauty.

God wants to be our Father. Even when we have to face suffering or hardship He wants the best for us. We can be assured that even the worst of hardships is not to be compared to the wonderful future that God has in store for his children.

Questions

1. 'I believe in God the Father Almighty'. Use your own words to explain what this sentence means.
2. God is concerned about his creation. How do we know?
3. Believing creation is more likely than believing evolution theory. What do you think? Why?
4. When God allows something to happen it does not automatically mean that He approves of it. Can you explain this? Read Genesis 3 and Genesis 4:1-12. Also give an example from our time.