

Lesson 5

- The bible is unique
- God starts a journey with Abram
- Jesus Christ, our Saviour

The bible is unique

Lesson 5a

The bible is unique

As we saw in the last lessons, the bible is a unique book with a unique message, a message not from man but from God. One way the uniqueness of the bible becomes apparent is in its many names. In this lesson, we will have a look at the most important ones of these names.

The book

The word bible is derived from the Greek word *biblia*, which means books. One translation of the bible has been given the name *The Book*. The bible contains 66 books, but altogether they form one book. The bible is unique in the sense that it ultimately is the only important book on earth and therefore it is appropriate to call it *The Book*.

The revelation from God

Another name that has been given to the bible is: *revelation from God*. A revelation always reveals a message that is not yet known. In the bible God reveals who He is. He comes to us because we belong to Him. God made man to have a mutual relationship of love with.

In the bible God shows how man chose a different way of life, separate from God. However, God has not abandoned man. He is not far away and out of man's reach. He makes himself known to people who had lost sight of Him.

Colossians 1:26

'the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints'

The bible is God's revelation for in the bible God reveals his love for us.

The Word of God

Another well-known name for the bible is the *Word of God*. God gives us his words in the bible. He uses men to write the

words down, but it remains his Word. Only in the bible we find what God has to say to us. No one can give us a better account of who God is and what he asks from us than He himself.

Psalm 119: 105

*'Your word is lamp to my feet
And a light for my path'*

The gospel

The contents of the bible have been called *the gospel*, which means the 'good news'. God brings us good news:

- *God takes away our guilt*

Man chose against God and therefore every human being is guilty before God. No one is able to give God the love that He deserves as our Maker. No one can pay this debt. The good news is that Jesus, the Son of God, has taken this guilt on Himself. He has paid the debt with his life in our place.

- *God saves from the power of death*

Through sin death came into the world. We have become mortal beings. However, God has broken the power of death. People still die, but through the work of Jesus Christ believers cannot be held by death forever. He was the first one to rise from the dead. He conquered death. It no longer has a victory over man.

- *God provides a future: eternal life on a new world*

God wants to restore people to the life He had meant for them, a life without sin, without death. This can only be realised if this broken world makes place for a new world. God promises that this will happen. When the time comes, the dead will rise from their graves and all believers will receive a new, eternal life in the presence of God. Only God can give us such a future.

Psalm 119:81 *'My soul faints with longing for your salvation,
But I have put my hope in your word'.*

The bible is a guide for our lives

We could call the bible a guide for our lives. It teaches us how to live, although by nature we tend to resist this guidance. Living the way God wants us to, often means experiencing ups and downs. We see this in the lives of biblical characters and we will see it in our own lives. However, this should not discourage us. The bible is meant for imperfect beings and God promises us that He wants to forgive our sins and help us to live according to his will. This does mean that we need to continually read the bible. We need it daily like we need our daily bread. We need to use the bible as a guideline for our lives. When we do so, we will see how unique and valuable the bible is. There is no better teacher than God.

Psalm 119:11-16 *'I have hidden your word in my heart;
That I might not sin against you.
Praise be to you, O LORD;
Teach me your decrees.
With my lips I recount
All the laws that come from your mouth.
I rejoice in following your statutes
As one rejoices in great riches.
I meditate on your precepts
And consider your ways.
I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your words'.*

In the names that have been given to the bible, the emphasis is on God's message for us. He knows our past; He shows us the way in the present; He shows us the future. The Word of God encompasses our entire lives.

No other book is like the bible

The bible is the only book that can bring people salvation. It shows the way to obtain this salvation. People often regard the bible as being of equal value as many other books. This would mean that everyone is free to choose which book is best for him. However, it is not like that. Only the bible is a divine book with a unique message. The following shows the uniqueness of the bible.

- *God keeps the promises He makes in the bible.*
There are many examples in the bible of promises God makes that become a reality. The most important one is God's promise at the beginning of the bible to bring a saviour in the world who will take away the guilt of man. This promise is repeated again and again through the ages. We can find it throughout the Old Testament. The New Testament starts off with the accounts of eyewitnesses of the coming and the work of this saviour. God kept his promise. Jesus came.
- *Redemption from sin is free.*
With God we do not need to earn anything. Every other religion shows a way for people to achieve their own salvation. The bible is unique because in it God offers us salvation for free. The only thing God asks from us is to believe in Jesus Christ. We do not need to achieve anything to be freed from our guilt.

No book written by man is equal to the bible. For this reason the bible itself points out that there cannot be another gospel but what we find in the bible.

Galatians 1:8: *'But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!'*

Galatians 1:11,12 *'I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any*

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man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ'.

The good news that God reveals in the bible is unique. Let us therefore receive the bible as a precious gift.

Psalm 119:72

'The law from your mouth are more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold'.

Questions

1. What do the words bible, revelation and gospel mean?
2. Many people believe that God does not want to be involved with mankind any longer. Why is this not true?
3. Why do other religions want people to attain their own salvation? Is it a difficult or an easy thing for people to accept salvation for free? Explain.
4. What name for the bible do you like best? Why?

God starts a journey with Abram

Lesson 5b

God starts a journey with Abram

God caused Abram and Sarai to leave the city of Ur along with Terah, Abram's father. He wanted them to leave that dangerous city where even their relatives had fallen for the temptation to worship idols. They moved to Haran, where they stayed for a while. However, after Terah dies, they need to move on.

God speaks to Abram

Read: Genesis 12:1-9

12:2 *to bless*: to seek good things for someone

I will make your name great: I will make you into an important person

12:3 *to curse*: to seek bad things for someone

The first three verses of Genesis 12 are very important. God tells Abram about his plan. He gives Abram a command and a number of promises.

Genesis 12:1-3

'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'

The command

God tells Abram to leave his country and his family. He has to leave Haran and his father's family who are still there. This is not an easy thing to do. Moving to a different country means that Abram will lose many of his rights. It means that he and his wife will be in danger of ill treatment and discrimination. Moreover, Abram is not only to leave his country but also his family. In his time people would usually spend their whole lives with their family and therefore it must have been a big step.

Family members would protect and help one another. Abram will have to do without this help and protection. He has to leave everything that provides security behind.

The promises

God asks a lot from Abram and Sarai, but He also promises them wonderful things. First of all, He promises them a country of their own. Abram is not just told to leave his country and his family behind but God promises He will give something better in return. He will lead Abram personally to the country He has chosen for him, Canaan* - what is now called Israel.

Secondly, He promises Abram and Sarai descendants. God will make them into a great nation who will live in the land of God's promise.

Finally, God promises to bless Abram. He will become an important person and he will prosper. On top of that, all people who belong to Abram, who are on his side, will prosper. The blessing that is now for Abram will one day be for people of all nations. This is what God means when He says: *'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'*.

God does not mean that all those people will be rich and famous. He means that they will be saved from the power of Satan. He will put an end to the punishment that is due to them. Abram did probably not realise what God's promises entirely meant, but we are able to tell because we now have the whole bible.

God promises Abram wonderful things, but it cannot have been easy for Abram to believe that he would receive those promises.

Canaan, the land that God promises, is not an empty country, waiting for Abram and his descendants to arrive. It is already inhabited by a great number of people from all kinds of nations.

God's promise about their offspring seems impossible. Abram and Sarai cannot have children, let alone bring forth a nation.

Abram takes God's word for it

Although God's promises seem impossible, Abram believes. He trusts that God will be able to do what He says. He does what God told him and together with Sarai and Lot he goes on his way. They take their slaves, their cattle and everything they possess. After travelling for hundreds of miles they reach Canaan.

When Abram gets there, do you think he was immediately rewarded for his faith? Do all the inhabitants of Canaan flee before him? Certainly not! God tests Abram's patience. He promises that Abram's descendants will possess the country. Abram will have to be satisfied with a promise. Nevertheless, he does believe. As a response to God's promise he builds an altar and brings a sacrifice to God. It is a sign of his trust in God, especially because Abram brings the sacrifice at the great tree of Moreh, which means the tree of the fortuneteller. It was a sacred tree to the people of Canaan, where they believed their gods spoke to them and where they would bring their sacrifices to those gods. God also spoke to Abram near this tree and showed him in that way that the gods of Canaan mean nothing to Him. He is the God who reigns, not only in Ur but also in Canaan.

Abram shows the Canaanites that he does not believe in the power of their gods. In their holy place he brings a sacrifice to his God. Abram is very brave to do so; he could have paid for it with his life. You can imagine he might have wanted to be a bit more secretive than that. Instead, he openly shows the Canaanites what he believes in. He is certain of God's protection.

Abram tries to save himself

Abram is now in Canaan. He is not a legal citizen but a stranger. He does not own a single piece of land in the country that God has promised him. Nevertheless, he is there.

However, this does not last for long. There is a famine in the country and Abram has to flee to Egypt with Sarai and his nephew Lot. Apparently, they have heard that there is enough food there.

Read: Genesis 12:10-20

12:15 *Pharaoh*: the title of the Egyptian king

Abram knows that in Egypt, like in Canaan, he has no rights. He is afraid the Egyptians might kill him when they discover he is the husband of the beautiful Sarai. He thinks he can solve the problem by calling her his sister. It is not even a complete lie because she is his stepsister.

The position of a brother is safer than that of a husband. Abram reckons that when men will come to ask him for Sarai's hand, he will be able to get away with some sort of promise whereas otherwise they might have killed him.

The plan seems to work until Sarai's beauty is reported to the king. He immediately takes her into his harem. In those days the king would have that kind of power. No one could stop him from taking whatever he wanted. No one asks Abram's permission.

Apparently, the king is very impressed with Sarai's beauty. He gives Abram, the 'brother' of his new wife, a complete flock and a host of slaves.

Abram does not say a word and also Sarai, who wants to protect Abram, keeps quiet. However, God intervenes. He punishes the Pharaoh and his family. The bible does not tell us what the punishment is. Probably, his people were struck with illness. Pharaoh immediately understands what is wrong. He accuses Abram of holding back the truth and sends him and Sarai out of the country.

From this history we know that Abram does not always entirely trust God. He needs to learn real confidence through his mistakes. In this story he seems to have totally forgotten about God. God had promised to make him into a great nation and

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that He would bless him. He had given him the guarantee, '*Whoever curses you, I will curse*'. Abram could have known that he and Sarai were safe in God's hands wherever they would go. However, when the worse happened, he did not dare to trust in God's protection.

If God had not intervened, Sarai would have spent the rest of her life in the Egyptian court and it would have been impossible for Abram and Sarai to bring forth a nation. However, God wants to keep his promise; he wants to give Abram a country and make him the father of a nation. For that reason He saves Sarai and even makes sure that she and Abram leave Egypt with more wealth than they brought.

Abram and Lot separate

Abram left behind his whole family in Ur. Only his nephew Lot came with him. Now he will even have to separate from Lot. When they return from Egypt, Abram, Sarai and Lot pitch their tents in a place called Bethel. Abram and Lot are both wealthy and own a great number of livestock. They have shepherds to look after their flocks and their cattle. One day, the shepherds have an argument over the lack of space.

Abram decides it would be better for them to separate. Both of them are strangers in Canaan and they need to be careful to avoid trouble. Abram gives Lot the first choice of where to go. Standing on a hilltop, Lot sees how green the valley of the river Jordan is. It looks like a paradise to him and without thinking about his uncle, he chooses this fertile area and moves to the vicinity of a city called Sodom. This city is renowned for the wickedness of its inhabitants, but that does not seem to bother Lot.

It seems Abram has learned something from what happened in Egypt. This time, he does not want to do without God's help. He does not mind Lot choosing the best part and just patiently waits until God will give him his part. After Lot has gone, God shows that Abram has done the right thing.

Read: Genesis 13:14-18
13:18 *Hebron*: look at map 3

After Lot has left, God encourages Abram. He promises him that the whole of Canaan will one day belong to him. God also ensures Abram that he will not inherit the country by himself. He and Sarai will have an innumerable offspring. Abram believes God's promise. Again he builds an altar as a response to God's promise.

Melchizedek

A little while later, Abram realises once more how God is taking care of him in everything. The peace in Canaan is disturbed. A number of the kings of the peoples living to the east of Canaan attack the cities in the area of the river Jordan. They defeat the Canaanites. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are plundered and many of their inhabitants are taken as prisoners.

Abram hears that his nephew Lot has been taken as well. He goes after him with over three hundred of his slaves and in the night they attack the enemy. With God's help Abram and his little army win the battle.

Abram delivers Canaan, the country that God has promised him, from its enemies. When he returns from his victory, someone comes to meet him. It is Melchizedek the king of Salem – what will later be called Jerusalem. He gives bread and wine to Abram and his men to renew their strengths. Melchizedek is not an ordinary king. He is also a priest, a special servant of God. There is someone who worships God amongst all these Canaanites with their idols! It must have been a great encouragement to Abram.

Melchizedek says to Abram: 'The God who made heaven and earth has given you the victory. May that God bless you'.

By means of Melchizedek, God lets Abram know that he does not have to be afraid in the land of Canaan. He says: 'I have given you victory now and I will continue to protect you always'.

God encourages Abram and shows him that in every situation he can count on Him. God makes Abram's faith stronger.

Questions

1. Why did God want Abram to leave his homeland and his family? Look at Joshua 24:2-3 and Genesis 12:1-3. Joshua 24:2 *Joshua*: the leader of the Israelites, *the River*: the river Euphrates.
2. You might say Abram was thrown into the deep end. He had to give up everything that gave him security. He had to do what God asked of him and completely trust God to keep his promise.
 - a. Where did Abram find the courage to take this step? Look at Hebrews 11:8, *Abraham*: God changed Abram's name to Abraham.
 - b. Where does faith come from? Look at Ephesians 2:8, *grace*: a gift from God.
3. Abram had to learn to trust God through his mistakes.
 - a. What examples did you see in this lesson of Abram's trust in God?
 - b. What examples did you see of Abram's lack of trust?

Lesson 5c

Jesus Christ, our Saviour

In lesson 3c we saw how the Apostolic Creed can be divided into three parts. The first part that we discussed in the last lesson is about God the Father and his work: creating, sustaining and ruling over the world. The next part is about the Son of God and his work: the salvation of mankind.

The name of God's Son: Jesus

When you read the Apostolic Creed (see lesson 3c), you will notice that a large part of it is about the Son of God. Six out of the twelve articles are about the Son of God and his work. In the following lessons in the c-series, we will go through these articles one by one. In this lesson we will consider the name that was given to God's Son. First of all we will discuss the name 'Jesus' and further on in the lesson we will discuss the name 'Christ'.

The name Jesus means 'saviour', a very appropriate name for the Son of God. He came down to the earth to save men.

Life in danger

Why do men need to be saved and what do they need saving from? When your house is on fire and you are inside, you need to be saved. Also when you are swimming in the sea and you have a sudden spasm or when something gets stuck in your windpipe and you need to be rescued. It is very obvious that you need a saviour in those cases. But when you are doing well and you feel happy, why would you need a saviour?

Surely, you only need a saviour when you are in desperate need?

People can be in need of a saviour without realising. When for example, the police receive a telephone call about a bomb that has been placed in a certain building, the people in the building are unaware of the danger and of their need to be saved. Only when the police tell them to evacuate the building, they will realise they are in danger.

People can be in danger without realising it. From the bible we know that all people are in need of a saviour. If nothing would happen all people would be doomed to die an eternal death.

Salvation is a necessity

All people naturally rebel against God. Everyone is guilty before God. God asks from us what He asked from Adam and Eve: faithfulness, love and obedience. It is not an unreasonable demand. God made people in such a way that they could love and obey God. The fact that people decided to rebel against God does not change God's demand.

God had told Adam and Eve that He would punish them with eternal death if they would be unfaithful to Him. He did not only mean that they would die, but moreover that they would be separated from Him forever. They would have to do without Him forever. It was a terrible prospect. Instead of eternal happiness and a life with God they would have to face eternal punishment.

Adam and Eve rebelled against God. They disobeyed Him. In lesson 2b we saw that it was not just their fate that this happened. They knew better and could have done better. With all their knowledge and power, they chose against God and in favour of death.

Eternal death was not just the punishment for Adam and Eve but with them for all people after them who would disobey God. We will also have to face eternal punishment. God is a holy God. Our unfaithfulness and continual disobedience causes Him pain.

You might wonder: Isn't God a loving God? Doesn't the bible say that He is love and that He has pity on us? Can He not turn a blind eye?

It does say in the bible that God is a loving God. But it also tells us that God is just. We cannot trade his justice for his love. God has said that whoever disobeys Him, deserves punishment. He does not change his mind about that. God is not whimsical like us. He is God; He always remains the same.

Whatever He says is valid even after thousands of years and that is why no one can escape this terrifying reality that all men deserve God's punishment.

Is there a way out?

Man's situation is not looking good. It can be compared to the situation of people in a building with a time bomb. If no one acts, a disaster will happen. When we realise the serious nature of our situation, we can only do one thing: search for a way out. Is there a way to escape punishment?

The bible compares our situation with that of a person with great debts. We need to pay our debts with God, but we cannot. Our debt with God increases every day. Fortunately, there is a way to escape from our debts: someone else can pay for us. We do not need to perfectly obey God ourselves in order to be saved. We do not need to undergo the death penalty ourselves. If someone else can do it for us we can go free. God will be satisfied.

Who can pay our debt?

Who would be willing and able to pay such an enormous debt? It is impossible for a human being. Even if a human being would want to do it, it would be impossible. No one can bear the weight of God's punishment. One sinner cannot save another.

The way out that God offers seems to lead to a dead end. It is impossible for any sinful man to save us. However, God amazingly decided to become a man to offer us a way out.

John 3:16-17

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'

We have looked at the first half of this passage before. It is a central passage in the bible. It shows that God himself offers the possibility of escaping punishment. God does not change

his demand. He does not change the punishment for unfaithfulness and disobedience. However, He sends his own Son to become man and pay the debt for other people. God is not a cruel tyrant who enjoys punishing people for their crimes. On the contrary, God loves people so much that He wants to give up his own Son for them. His Son, as a human being, will be able to fulfil his demands and take on the punishment that was on mankind.

We do not need to do anything to win God's favour. We do not need to fully and perfectly obey Him. We do not need to undergo the punishment that we deserve. The only thing we need to do is to believe in God's Son, to believe that He has paid our debts for us.

Imagine you are in great financial debts for whatever reason and the creditor is after you. Then someone gives you a cheque worth the exact amount of your debt. Of course you will immediately go to the bank and pay your debt. You will not leave the cheque at home thinking it is just a scrap of paper of no value.

The Son of God gives us, as it were, a signed cheque to pay off our debts. It will cancel our debt with God for good. We do need to admit that we have a debt with God and we need to accept the cheque. If we do not take the cheque to God it is of no value.

The Son of God, our Saviour

Jesus, the Son of God is the Saviour of mankind. He took our punishment on Him. Although He was perfectly obedient to God, God counted Him as a sinner:

2 Corinthians
5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'

In other words: for our sake, God has regarded his Son as thoroughly wicked. He has punished Him for our wickedness. Why? To make us righteous through our unity with his Son.

Jesus Christ, our Saviour

It is like an exchange: we swap places with Jesus. Jesus is punished for our wickedness and Jesus' obedience to God counts as ours.

We cannot earn this exchange by living good lives. It is a gift from God. The only thing we can do is to accept it. We need to believe that Jesus is punished in our place. If we do that, God will cancel our debt and accept us as his children.

Jesus, the Christ

The Apostolic Creed calls the Son of God, 'Jesus Christ'. The name Christ literally means 'the anointed one'.

Anointing was something that happened regularly in the time of the Old Testament. When someone would receive a special task from God, He would be anointed. In the name of God an oily perfume was poured over his head. It was a sign for that person that it was God who had given him the special task to do. It was a sign of being chosen by God.

The oil that was poured out was a sign of the Holy Spirit. When the oil would run over a person's body it would symbolise the Holy Spirit filling him. The anointing was a promise that the Holy Spirit would help that man with his task. He would enable him to do it.

People would be anointed for a number of different tasks. A man could be called to become a prophet, which meant he had to speak God's words to his people. He would have to bring God's message to them about what God expected from his people or about things that would happen in the future.

Another role that people would be anointed for was that of priest. A priest was someone who was a special servant of God. In the time of the people of Israel, the priests would bring sacrifices to God in the name of the people.

Finally, people could be anointed to become king. They had the task to rule over their people in the name of God.

The anointing of Jesus

Before Jesus started his ministry on earth, He was also anointed. In his case He was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit himself. This way God made clear that He had

given his Son this task to do and moreover it meant that the Holy Spirit would empower Jesus to fulfil his heavy duty.

Many people have been called by God to do a special task. However, Jesus' task was the most serious of all. Because He was 'the' one that God had appointed, He is often called the Christ, or Christ.

Which task?

People would be anointed when they were called to become prophet, priest or king. What was Jesus' task? The bible shows us that He had all three roles. God made Jesus:

- Prophet: He had to speak to the people in the name of God and bring them his message of salvation.
- Priest: He had to bring the greatest sacrifice of all time: himself. This was the only way to save the people.
- King: He will reign over all people and save people from the power of Satan.

The bible also shows us that Jesus fully completed this task that God had given Him. He has completed everything that God asked Him to do on earth. Because of it we can live in a good relationship with God.

Questions

- 1a. What does the name 'Jesus' mean?
- 1b. Why was the Son of God given this name?
- 2a. What does the name 'Christ' mean?
- 2b. Why was the Son of God given this name?
3. How did God show his love for man?