

# blessed to bless

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

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# Adapting *Blessed to Bless* to your Situation

One of the biggest challenges of this book being useful at various schools and churches is how to fit it into the class time given at different schools. The school where it was created gives about 100 class periods over a four year period, or 25 per year, give or take. But your school or church may not have that many. I cannot express how much it pains me to say *skip or combine* certain chapters. One option on some of these *skips and combines* is to ask participants, at minimum, to read the summary commentary for those chapters.

Having said that, here are suggestions that will get you from between 86 sessions down to 53, depending on what you decide to cut or combine. Keep in mind that for schools using this book, neither of these numbers include review days and exam days.

## **Section 1, Unit 1 (From 10 to 6)**

Combine the two class periods on creation.

Skip chapter 6 on the long ages (Chapter 6)

Condense the Noah Stories and Tower of Babel into two meeting periods.

## **Section 1, Unit 2 (From 10 to 6)**

Combine chapters 11 and 12

Skip chapter 15 on Issac's Marriage to Rebeekah.

Combine chapters 16 and 17 on Jacob's family and marriages

Skip chapter 20, it is review.

## **Section 2, Unit 1 (From 11 to 8)**

Skip chapter 22 review

Combine 24 and 25

Chapters 27–30 are all selections of the Torah teachings. You can choose and condense.

## **Section 2, Unit 2 (From 12 to 7)**

Skip Chapter 32, though it pains me to say this because it introduces interpretation

Skip chapter 35, same as above

You may need to choose between chapter 36 and 37. Samson is more known.

Chapter 39 and 40 can be combined.

Chapter 42 and 43 can be combined.

## **Section 3, Unit 1 (From 10 to 6 or 7)**

Chapters 44 and 45 could be combined.

Chapter 47 and 48 could be combined

Chapter 52's big idea could be folded into 47–48 combo

Chapter 53 could be skipped, but it's important, so it's your decision.

### **Section 3, Unit 2 (From 11 to 7)**

Combine chapters 54 and 55 and get right into the reign of Solomon and chapter 55.

Skip chapter 58 (it means you'll skip the chariot of fire story, which is tough)

Skip chapter 60 (Jeremiah) and only teach Ezekiel-Daniel for Babylon

Skip chapter 64

### **Section 4, Unit 1 (From 11 to 6)**

Skip chapter 65

Combine chapters 68 and 69

Combine chapters 70 and 71

Choose what aspects of chapters 72, 73, and 74 to address (Jesus as teacher, parables)

### **Section 4, Unit 2 (From 11 to 7)**

Combine chapters 77 and 78

Combine 83 and 84, summarize and be selective

Skip chapter 85 or combine it with chapter 86

## **BLESSED TO BLESS IN A CHURCH or HOME SETTING**

If you have a group of teenagers, or even a group of adults in your church who are not familiar with the scriptures and want to do this overview, the four Sections are set up to do a lingering, thoughtful reading of the Bible.

Each SECTION of Blessed to Bless can be scheduled over a year, *Unit One* in the Fall up to Christmas, and *Unit Two* in after Christmas up to Summer. Take a break over summer and start the next section the following year. You can challenge a Junior High or High School Group to cover this in four years. One challenge is what to do with those kids rising up into the program each year. Teaching it in a school, I have new students every year and they manage to understand preceding material fairly well. In other words, have them jump in wherever you are in the survey.

Reading together with your pre-teen or teenager at home is a fairly simple thing to schedule, for those who want to do this with their children or in a home education situation.

# A Core Skill Readers Can Develop in B2b

## (The “so what?” of reading the Bible)

The core skill we are trying to cultivate is the ability to identify the various kinds of abstract ideas found in Biblical stories and then put them to use. Some of these abstract ideas are explicit and appear as easily identifiable life lessons. Some are more indirect and present themselves in a highly symbolic manner (i.e. that *demon* alcohol!). Part of that skill is then deciding how that abstract idea can be responsibly applied to a secondary context (not a context found in the Bible), but in the reader’s life, or in culture and society, or in the life of a friend.

We do this with all kinds of stories in our lives. A movie, novel, or song that truly impacts us, we identify (consciously or not) abstract ideas from those sources that we then appropriate them for our situation. A reader identifies with one of the characters in *Little Women* and then applies those dynamics to their own life.

Learning to interpret and apply the scriptures is how the Creator speaks into our lives and it teaches us how to interpret our own stories and see how God is at work, explicitly and implicitly, with us. This is how God most often speaks. This skill is the “so what” of reading the Bible.

This three step process is introduced in Section Two: The Exodus, Wilderness, and the Land of Canaan (**Chapter 32**, Canaan as a Symbolic Abstraction). It is then revisited throughout the survey. You’ll then see this utilized explicitly again in **Chapters 35, 52, 75**, but it can be applied more consistently with other readings to develop the “muscle.” It is also presented as an option in **Chapter 25**, *The Golden Calf and the Presence of God*, in the Class Notebooks (if you are choosing to download and utilize those).

It is in Section Three (United Monarchy, Divided Monarchy, The Prophets) where I have asked our students to attempt this exercise with nearly every reading. This is so they begin to develop the skill of interpretation and application. You will see this in the class booklets and assignments posted at BlessedtoBless.us.

## Class Outlines and Keynote Presentations

Class outlines in DOC version that can be adapted for your use are available for download. Go to:

<http://www.blessedtobless.us>

<https://www.churchpublishing.org/blessedtobless>

# Teaching Ideas and Additional Resources

## Chapters 1 and 2: The Creation Story(s)

### 30,000 Foot View

There is a possibility that reading the creation accounts will get you bogged down in arguments about religion and science. The first few sessions do not ignore the issue, but it isn't the primary focus. One of the leading assumptions in *Blessed to Bless* is that the Bible is primarily a literary work. The authors were crafting stories they believed pointed toward bigger truths about God and life. So what are those big truths in these creation stories?

1. There is a divine being who purposefully created everything.
2. Creation culminated in the formation of human beings, fashioned in the Creator's image.

### Opening Prayer

*Creator God, even as we address you as creator, give us insight into what it means to be a part of your creation, even a special part that you trusted as partners in the care for what you have made. In your holy name we pray, Amen.*

You can choose to not assign the reading in this book but rather begin by assigning Genesis 1–2 from the Bible. Print off Genesis 1–2 without chapters and verses. You can do this at [BibleGateway.com](http://BibleGateway.com) which gives you the option of displaying the text without them. Then print it and give it to those in your group. Have them read it on their own and identify where the break between the two stories exists. Or, read both stories aloud together and then discuss as a group where one story ends and the other begins:

### Assignment: The Creation Story(s)

Read Genesis chapters 1 and 2, using this paper. Do not read it in a Bible. Then follow the instructions at the end of the reading.

Most of the people who study the Hebrew creation story closely observe that there is not one story, but actually two different stories.

See if you can locate where the first story ends and the second story begins? Draw a line where you think that happens.

Now, look at the two stories. What is different about them? THAT is what we will discuss in class next time. Read the creation stories and answer these two questions at the end of this paper. Bring it with you next class.

1. Mark a line where you think one story ends and the second begins?
2. What is different about the two stories? List some things:

Next, discuss what is different about these two stories and why the writers of each did something so different. Do they compliment each other? Or, are they in conflict? These ideas can be discussed in small groups and then report back to the larger group.

What do you think about characterizing these stories as two types of TV shows, the first a documentary, the second a situational drama (and maybe even a comedy)?

You can talk about issues of faith and science, but know that these topics will be part of the discussion in Chapters 3–6.

## Closing Prayer

God, you entrust to us a special place in your creation, beings with your image imprinted in us. Draw our thinking in the coming days to what that might mean. What do we share with you, exactly? And may those insights empower us to the task of caring for this world in the way you imagined.

# SECTION ONE

## The Book of Genesis

### Unit One: The Creation and the Fall

#### Chapter 7, Sloppy Drunk Noah

Even as someone more familiar with the Bible than the average reader, you may not know this story. Why include it? Two reasons. One, I have found that when I assign this story and warn young readers they may be surprised by it, that they often return to the next session feeling validated by my trusting them with a story that has been kept from them. I affirm they are serious readers and can be trusted with difficult passages. I find most students respond to this affirmation and respond accordingly.

Two, there is an underlying story arc through both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament of suspicion and distrust of the Canaanite culture. This story is foundational to that mistrust and prejudice. It's where it all started. In the subsequent stories where Canaanites are presented as villainous, I need only ask my students, "What did Noah yell at his grandson?" And they remember, "Cursed be Canaan!"

So why did Noah curse his Grandson? It isn't explicit in the story, but scholars have garnered, based on knowledge of ancient tribal cultures, that Canaan, perhaps in alliance with his father Ham, tried to overthrow Noah. Some cultures included sexual violence against the leader as one possible demonstration of dominance in such a rebellion. All of this is inferred, but reading forward you will notice that Canaanites are characterized by two particular destructive behaviors—child sacrifice and sexual promiscuity.

Let me clear to you as a teacher and leader. I DO NOT teach this particular interpretation to 5th graders. I only suggest that maybe Canaan tried to overthrow his Grandfather and maybe beat his grandfather up in that process. On rare occasions, when I am teaching 8th graders the story of Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15, Chapter 80), and I delve into the history of the cultural animosity between Canaanites and Jews, I may reference it, depending on the maturity level of the class.

### Unit Two: God Conceives a Blessing Culture

#### Chapter 13, TEACHING CIRCUMCISION

To teach this or not, and at what age? I confess that when I started teaching this survey we skipped this with 5th and 6th graders and introduced it in the 7th grade year. But as parents trust in our program grew I began to sense that our parents were eager for their children to learn about such things, if done carefully and with sensitivity. When I first began to include it I would send out an email ahead of time giving parents the option of their child being removed from the class. We never had that request made.

My recommendation is to teach this with a mixture of seriousness and levity. I tell the students this is an ancient practice that was (and still is for many) a cultural marker for men. It is still practiced by most Jewish families and a majority of Muslim men (though for different reasons). It is still offered as a medical option to most parents of newborn boys because some medical studies have determined it is more sanitary over a long period and curtails some male cancers. There is a large number of folks who are against it.

I explain it by asking the students if they know what a turtleneck sweater looks like. I mention that you can draw the turtle neck up over your head and fold in back down. Then I tell them there is an extra flap of skin that covers the top of a male penis that is sort of like that, and that when a boy is circumcised, they make the turtle neck like a t-shirt. Sort of. That is usually all they want to hear and we move on, emphasizing that Abraham established this as a “mark” for Jewish men.

I do not bring up female circumcision, which is different than male circumcision and students typically don't ask about it.

## DVD Movie Help

On this day we show the scene of the Three Visitors from Richard Harris *Abraham* movie. That scene begins with a tasteful scene of Abraham circumcising Ishmael. I stop the DVD and go introduce the practice.

## Chapter 13: Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and His Daughters

I don't assign the Sodom and Gomorrah story to be read at home. The way we teach it is by showing the scene from the Richard Harris Movie. The movie has a somewhat sanitized version, though for kids who are really listening to the dialogue they are a little shocked when Lot offers to give his daughters to the shady men in exchange for leaving the divine beings alone.

The *Lot and his Daughters* story is one that I never teach in class and don't assign for them to read because it is for ten year olds. If you are using *Blessed to Bless* as a text book, I mention that story, so be prepared to talk through the awful nature of their actions. For high school students and older I would treat the story as any difficult contextual story.

## Chapter 18: Jacob Wrestles

For many years now I have begun this class by asking them to participate in an arm wrestling contest. I do this without any explanation, and they are always eager to do that rather than our normal lecture/discussion. Typically one of our more astute kids figures out what the tie-in to Jacob will be. My hope is that there will be one particular arm wrestling match that is long. After this is over, I gather them by a print of a painting of Jacob wrestling the angel, and then talk through the story with them standing in front of the painting.

## Chapter 19: Joseph

We take two class periods and watch Dreamworks “Prince of Dreams” and when the movie is over we review some of the more poignant aspects of the story.



## SECTION TWO

### Exodus, Wilderness, Conquest, and the Judges

#### Unit One: The Exodus: Forty Years in the Wilderness and the Halacha

##### Chapter 22: Escape from Egypt

Just as we finished the book of Genesis with a Dreamworks movie, Prince of Dreams, we begin Exodus with the Dreamworks film, “Prince of Egypt.” This takes two sessions. I have given extra credit to students who are interested in reading Exodus 1–14 and noting three differences between the film rendition and the textual story.

##### Chapter 25: The Golden Calf

I use a youtube clip to highlight Aaron’s glib response (“It wasn’t my fault!”) when Moses returns. It is of a little girl who blames her Barbie dolls for getting nail polish on the rug. The video is called “Barbie Made Me Do it.” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u\\_gBo1i0J9o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_gBo1i0J9o)

##### Chapter 27–28: The Halacha or the Pathway

In our class we use these two periods to do a couple of things. We highlight a few of the teachings of Moses and underscore that these rules were giving their lives structure and safety. This is the first time in the overall survey we introduce explicitly the main skill we want to teach, that of interpretation and eventual application. We do this by a process I call “abstracting” from stories. In this case, the abstraction is “God gives us guidelines for structure and safety.” On the Unit exam I ask them to list ten *teachings* or rules that give their life structure and make them feel safe. We also use one of the class periods for them to make their own Mezuzah. You can purchase blank wooden Mezuzah boxes, have them decorate it, and place their “Torah” in the box. You can also provide copies of the Shema to place in those Mezuzahs.

#### Unit Two: Joshua and the Conquest of Canaan, the Dark Period of the Judges, and the Call of Samuel

##### Chapter 32: Canaan As an Abstract Idea

This is the second time we introduce this idea of identifying abstract ideas within the story and then identifying the ways those ideas can be applied in a different context other than the Bible. In this case it is a discussion about what context in their lives they feel the most safe, settled, or “at home.”

## Chapter 37: Samson the Anti-Hero

This day's discussion ends up making a lasting impact because you are pulling back the curtain and reading the story the way it was intended by the authors and not a sanitized version made palatable for children. But it is still a complex issue the story presents. To what degree was Samson's poor decision-making part of a ruse to infiltrate Philistines? *And*, to what degree was he a rube? Ruse, rube, or both? And if the latter, to what degree does God use flawed people to fulfill a greater purpose? Many of the students are familiar with comic book and film character *Deadpool* as an example of an anti-hero, as well as *Professor Snape* from the *Harry Potter* Series.

## Chapter 38: Ruth and The Stages of Israel's Life

I found a claymation short film that encompasses the entire story of Ruth. We watch it and then discuss the larger themes. It is entitled *Testament - The Bible in Animation - Ruth* in Youtube. It's pretty good. Plus, who doesn't love a little claymation? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VovWbGnt4BY&t=1141s>

Stages of Israel's Life; If you choose to use this developmental mnemonic device, you'll notice that I used *Justin Bieber* as an example of the "young adult" who is of two minds, the one who wants to do the right thing *and* also the one who is careless. A young *Johnny Cash* is an older example of this "phase." You will need to consider current young celebrities who embody this dynamic.

## Chapter 42-43: The Call of Samuel

Why do I have a portion of I Samuel at the end of Section Two, Unit Two? It is sort of the way it worked out for our school and the allotment of teaching sessions to introduce that as part of the Judges and the Conquest. What it does nicely, however, is set up Section Three to begin with Israel's demand for a king, which is a significant seed change in their government and culture.

## SECTION THREE

### United Monarchy, Divided Monarchy, the Prophets

#### Unit One: The Rise and Fall of Saul, the Rise and Fall of David

##### Chapter 44: Israel Demands a King

I start class by lining them all up on a wall and tell them that I, as God's prophet (like Samuel) am going to choose a monarch for the class. I make a big deal about praying and trying to sense who God wants. I choose, and then call the forward to be anointed. I have purchased a rams horn that carries oil and begin to pour it on their head, but then I pour a little on mine instead, for effect. I tell the new king or queen that they are completely sovereign but they need to consult with God first. I add the caveat that if they want to be sure they are doing God's will, they need to check with God's prophet, which I have established is me. This underscores a power struggle between the prophet and the king, which if they did their reading, they know about already.

##### Chapter 46: God Anoints David

I begin this class period by showing the first scenes of the Richard Gere rendition of *King David*. The opening scene replays the drama of Saul's disobedience (I do have to warn the students that there is a severed head after Samuel kills King Agog of the Amalekites). But then the movie pivots toward Bethlehem and the anointing of David, then shifts toward Saul's emerging depression. I stop the film where David is singing to King Saul and talk through the salient points. I then start the film again and watch the David and Goliath scene and discuss afterward. Timing this takes some preparation and awareness of the clock. I often teach over the film while it is running.

##### Chapter 47: Saul Chases David

The chapter asks them to read six chapters, but I typically only assign three and leave the other three as an option. There is a great deal of interesting scenarios to talk through with these passages. This is one of my more interactive class discussion days.

Pooping in a cave. We have a good time in our class discussing the awkwardness of this encounter. King Saul must have been going "number two" for David and Joab to have enough time to discuss the merits of the situation and for David to have enough time to sneak up on him and cut a corner of his robe. Saul would need to have been . . . ahem . . . concentrating on something.

##### Chapter 48: David Rises to the Throne

The discrepancy of how exactly King Saul dies is easily resolved when you point out that 1 and 2 Samuel was always one book, but it was divided into two because of scroll length (I point out that the 7th Harry Potter book was made into two films because it was too long for one). King Saul fell on his own sword. The very

next chapter points out an ambitious Amalekite taking credit for it in hopes it would endear him to David. It doesn't work out that way for him, does it?

## Chapter 49: David Builds Unity

The scene in the Richard Gere *King David* film when he brings the Ark into Jerusalem and dances before it in his underwear is done very well. I use it toward the end of this class. When it is done I ask them if they could imagine how this might inspire the people? I point out that the United States President after the inauguration speech has in recent decades walked a portion of the road from the Capitol to the White House. I ask them if they could imagine Marines in full regalia walking with a copy of the U.S. Constitution in a decorative case in front of the president? I do, however, hope that never evolves into presidents dancing in their underwear.

## Chapter 50: David and Bathsheba

This is a story about David's abuse of power and exploitation of another person. It raises all kinds of questions you can discuss in a class period. One question is, "To what degree did Bathsheba have a choice in this matter?"

I don't know if you will want to teach on the Niddah and the Mikvah. There are some interesting rabbit holes to go down. The Mikvah after a woman's menstruation was connected to the belief that pain in child-bearing was part of Eve's punishment. The idiom of "the curse" having some connection to that origin idea. But there is an upside to that practice. The ritual bath name, mikvah, sounds like the Hebrew word for hope, tikvah. So those ritual baths, whether for a woman after her period, or for a man after becoming ritually unclean, placed their hope in God for mercy. And for a husband reuniting with his wife after their separation, there would be hope for a baby. But you don't need to go down this pathway, there is plenty to talk about.

As you approach Nathan's confrontation, a good scenario for "speaking truth to power" is asking the kids if they discovered the coach of a favorite sports team they played for was stealing from their trip fund, what would they do? This is good because it puts them in a situation where there is something at stake for them being a "whistleblower."

## Chapter 51-52: David's House Falls Apart

You will need to choose whether you want to assign and discuss this story. We have built up enough trust at our school that we can do it. But like the circumcision and rape stories from Genesis, it may require you send a "warning" email to parents. But it does set up a discussion about the skill set you are trying to develop of identifying abstract ideas of life lessons from the stories to be applied to life. David's poor parenting, lack of discipline, and whether it is an act of mercy or moral weakness leads to the discussion of Ezekiel 17 in Chapter 52.

There is a song I play with the lyrics by a songwriter named Pierce Pettis called *Absalom*. The song is written in the voice of David, full of regrets about his failures as a father. It maps in nicely with the "sour grapes" abstraction discussion. You can search for the lyrics.

## Unit Two: The Reign of Solomon, the Temple, the Divided Kingdom, and the Prophets

### Chapter 55: Wisdom

In Chapters 54–56 it is important to note that Solomon, like Saul and David before him, has two phases of his reign. He IS celebrated as one of the best Kings in this United monarchy period, and the nation grows in its wealth and the development of culture. This was possible only because David wrapped up their regional wars. This allowed Solomon to concentrate on trade and cultural development. At some point in his 40 year reign this begins to get toxic as you will read in the following chapter.

How you cover the wisdom literature will be up to you. I have done it in a lot of different ways, from assigning portions of it and then discussing, to assigning the Wisdom Series (three videos) from the Bible Project. Often, I do a little bit of both.

### Chapter 59: Assyrian Invasion and those prophets

It is almost unconscionable that the prophet Isaiah is covered in one class session along with Hosea and Amos. I typically assign Isaiah 1, 9, 11, 53 and then have students watch The Bible Project overview of Hosea. But Isaiah is so important to the study of Christianity that one day discussing it truly underserves the book. One option is to not cover Hosea, but the imagery of God as the faithful spouse to a cheating partner shows up again in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, so I've been torn. It will be a challenge that you, as a teacher and facilitator, will discover your own pace and approach. I race through it.

### Chapter 60: Jeremiah and the Art of Interpretation

This class session once again revisits the skill of reading for abstract ideas and then applying them responsibly. We take a very beloved passage (Jeremiah 29:11) and drill into its complexity. It's beautiful AND fraught because it asks us to see the possible redemptive elements during times of strain, oppression, and suffering.

### Chapter 61: Ezekiel the Street Artist

Sign Acts. Ezekiel is somewhat the king of this practice. In my class I point them toward some modern day artistic expressions that are approximations of this method. I remember a youth preacher coming to our church and mixing two different cakes in front of the kids, one normal and the other filled with all kinds of gross things. He then baked them, we played a game and then he presented both cakes beautifully frosted and cut pieces and invited them to come and taste the cakes. The point being that what we consume may seem on the surface to be okay, but at closer look can do harm.

I also offer a quick look at two documentaries:

A documentary filmmaker, Morgan Spurlock, (<http://morganspurlock.com>) is a modern day artist who understands this kind of attention getter communication. He has one documentary called "Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping." This tracks a comedian who created a "character" who is preaching against consumerism. <http://www.revilly.com/>

Supersize Me. Spurlock did a somewhat ridiculous experiment where he only eats McDonald's for 30 days. It is an exaggeration of the modern tendency to eat processed, salty, fatty food and its effects on our overall health. <http://morganspurlock.com/work/super-size-me/>)

You can find other examples of artists who do strange things to get the attention of their intended audiences by doing various internet searches; street artists, performance art.

## Chapter 62: Valley of Dry Bones, Ezekiel's Temple Vision

The vision of this temple that will be built gives very specific measurements. The court in which it is built is 32 times the size of Solomon's temple mount. If this temple were actually built, it would cover the majority of Jerusalem proper. And in our current context, building it would likely cause a regional, if not a world, war. There are some conservative Jews who are working toward the construction of this temple. When the temple was rebuilt after Ezekiel under Ezra-Nehemiah, it was a smaller, less majestic version of Solomon's temple. When Herod updated that rebuilt temple to the majestic version that Jesus eventually walked in, it was referred to as the "Second Temple." In fact, it is important to note that this period of rebuilding is known as the *Second Temple Period*.

It was in this "Second Temple" period when much of the Hebrew Bible was compiled and edited, portions of it perhaps even written. This period was a time of cultural rejuvenation and the cultivation of Jewish identity, in spite of (and in great part because of) the perpetual domination by foreign powers. So, keeping all this in mind, this Ezekiel Temple never was built. The dream to build it was rejuvenated when the Romans, in 70 A.D., burned the Second Temple to the ground. Bit by bit the vision to build a "Third Temple" ebbed and flowed in the centuries afterward. All you need to do is internet search "Third Temple" and you will see a variety of efforts to build it, even today. But has it already been built?

One interpretation of Ezekiel's vision is that the building of the Temple, this gargantuan structure that belies possibility, is not actually an actual building at all, but rather a spiritual temple. Go read John 2:13f. Jesus tells them he will destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus is referring to himself as the Temple. Jesus is the sacred dwelling that contains the presence of God. One interpretation of Ezekiel's blueprint characterizes the layout as being in the form of a man. The Holy of Holies being the mind of God, the altar being the heart of God, and the porticos being the arms and legs.

This is one interpretive "rabbit hole" you can go down if you have time.

## Chapter 63: Freedom from Persia: Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther

If you want to understand the religious stringency of the religious leaders of Jesus day, its foundations can be located here. The Persians let the Jews return home and rebuild. Inherent in that process was the belief that *this time* they needed to get it correct. *This time* they will be faithful to God. This was important because the general belief at the time was that God had allowed them to be dominated by foreign enemies because they failed being faithful to Torah. So now that they had a second chance, they intended to be *super strict* so that God will be with them and the Messiah will come and get us back in control of our destiny. This is where a mistrust of other religions and cultures gets nurtured. Even the marriages that many of them had in Babylon and Persia are seen as problematic and Ezra actually forces people to get divorced! This was all in the name of religious purity, which was tangled up in their ethnicity. The more faithful they are, the better chance the Messiah will come and get things back on track.

## SECTION FOUR

### Christianity Emerges Out of Judaism

#### Unit One: Messiah, Healer, Teacher, Divinity

##### Chapter 66: Messianic Expectations

This is your chance to talk politics. I have started this session with a look at the way modern people place a great deal of hope on political leaders to unite, repair, and heal American culture. *I have a slide show* where I show Barack Obama and the large crowds he drew. He was a symbol of unity for many; he was black and white, grew up middle class but went to Harvard, had a Muslim immigrant father and was Christian. He was a figure who could connect across many American spheres. Then I also show a photo of Trump and convey his “Make America Great Again” angle. I point out that anyone running for president is often said to have a “Messianic complex.” This is often seen as a negative thing, but I point out that anyone in a leadership position needs to have some notion that they have the vision and skill to lead and help people. For instance, you want your surgeon to have the confidence that he or she has the skills and ability to help you. The Jews of Jesus’ day were hoping for the Messiah, who in their mind would be “all the things.” Political, spiritual, healer, revolutionary.

##### Chapter 67: John the Baptizer

Use a clip of Jesus being baptized, there are a variety of them on *youtube* to choose from.

##### Chapter 68: Jesus the Healer

For Chapter 68, I start the class by listing two headings on the board:

Sickness that is Mostly Your Fault

Sickness that is Mostly Not Your Fault.

Then we brainstorm. Kids are usually astute enough to know that most illnesses are a combination of both, so lead the discussion with the distinction of naming illnesses that leaning one way or the other. What this leads to is a recognition of the consequential nature of many illnesses. If you do this, then this will happen. This a modern, scientific version of the Old Testament *Blessings and Curses*. The Old Testament version is more mystical; Your illness isn’t because you didn’t take care of yourself, it is because God is punishing you or abandoning you in the moment for being unfaithful. So this exercise is to compare and contrast the ancient world view with a more modern one.

So why do this? Where does it lead? Jesus, when he forgives the paralytic, is embracing that older worldview of sickness as a curse. It’s what most of them believed. When he heals that man, or anyone for that matter, he is conveying within that culture, that God is showing mercy and compassion toward these people, regardless of what they may have done wrong. I think the larger spiritual significance of Jesus as a healer *is the*

*making of this larger statement of grace and compassion*, regardless of what one might think of the Hebrew notion of *blessings and curses*. Jesus didn't just heal because he was nice. He healed because it made a profound statement about God's mercy toward all of us.

## Chapter 69: Jesus the Healer, Part 2

I start class by talking about some of the distinctions between left and right-brain thinking. The left-brain is logical, sequential, and looks for rational explanations for phenomena. The right brain is creative, fantastical, imaginative. I then ask how a left-brain scientific person might explain the story of the man from Gennesaret, and then list them. I do the same with the right brain. I tend to try to draw the class discussion on not creating false dichotomies, that perhaps there is a way to see a story like this being true, in some sense, from both sides of the brain.

## Chapter 71: Divinity

I set up a lamp on a dimmer switch with an exposed bulb, one of those bulbs that has the filament exposed. When they come in the lamp is on but turned way down. I use this to demonstrate the theological statement of Phillipians 2. Jesus has the full power of God (turn lamp all the way up to full brightness), but emptied himself of it (turn the bulb down) so that we can interact with him.

I often draw a large circle on the board with a dashed line with arrows pointing outward along the perimeter. This illustrates God's unlimited nature and *transcendence*. Then I draw the smallest possible dot in the middle, the big circle with a few arrows pointing down to it. This is God, when he became human in Jesus, limiting himself as a human, or his *immanence*. Then, I write the greek word "kenosis" which is used in the passage, for emptying. God emptied himself. But why? To answer that quest I then pivot to the John 14 passage.

In John 14, Jesus points out that the words he speaks and the actions he takes are not "him," but rather God working through him. This reminds us of the problematic nature of the divinity of Jesus (he is both *son-of-man-human* and *son-of-God-divine*). It is my contention that one of the reasons God was incarnated was to parse out his divine power in order to be an example for us. He demonstrated how we, as *sons-and-daughters-of-humanity*, can access *sons-of-God* power. God will work through us to do and accomplish things we cannot do on our own. Jesus, as fully God, had the capability to do extraordinary things on his own, but for our sake, to model and be an example for us, he limited himself and became a vessel like us to show how a life in communion with God can function.

## Chapter 73: Midrash

If you do an image search on "midrash" you can find a picture of one of the pages where the passage is in the middle, and the commentary is all around the margins.

## Chapter 75: The Practice of Abstraction

This is a culminating session on the skill of identifying abstract ideas or lessons and applying them to secondary situations.



## Unit Two: The Passion, Atonement, Resurrection, The Church, and Apostles

### Chapter 78: Blood and Non-Blood Atonements

I hope as a teacher and leader you see what I am trying to do here. The meaning and poignancy of Jesus' death cannot be glossed over if you are going to teach the essence of historical Christianity. The overall arc of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures paints a nuanced and complex picture of the "blood atonements." My goal is to do a basic overview of the internal dialogue the Hebrew tradition is having between two larger strains of piety:

- One, the need for a life of righteousness, justice and mercy.
- Two, the need for blood atonement.

The life of Jesus manifests both sides of this tension.

I use a curated version of Aslan's sacrifice in the movie version of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Do a search in youtube for "Aslan's sacrifice" and you'll find a variety of these cut and spliced scenes, part of which is Aslan explaining the nature of sacrifice.

### Chapter 79–80: Jonah, Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

In many ways, these two sessions are central to the thesis of *Blessed to Bless*, that God creates a culture through which, eventually, all the families of the earth will be blessed. Jonah is a story about the tension between the toxic insularity of Judaism and the call of Abraham to bless all the families of the earth. God wants to make his mercy available to all people and nations, but Jonah has grown so adverse to anything that is not Jewish he can't fathom it. We see how this gets expressed in Jesus' bizarre interaction with a Canaanite woman. Remember Noah and his grandson? "Cursed be Canaan!"

So, when Jesus finally ends his earthly ministry by sending his disciples out into the world to share his version of Judaism to every nation and race, this is a big seed change for them, but one that ultimately fills the promise of Abraham and Sarah.

I say it isn't out of the realm of possibility that one way to measure all the stories of the Hebrew Bible is to ask at any point, to what degree are they being faithful to the call of Abram and Sarai to be a blessing culture to all the families of the earth. Most of the time, they are failing at it. Jesus comes to complete the preparation and finally get them pointed in an outward direction. Insular to expansive, close to inclusive. Blessed to bless.

### The Movie *Risen*

We have tended to end Section Four by watching the movie *Risen*, which follows a Roman Centurion who is put in charge of overseeing the burial and subsequent disappearance of his body. Along the way he meets the resurrected Jesus and his life is unsettled by this encounter. It demonstrates many aspects of the reading done in this unit and underscores his sending the Apostles out to the world with his message.