

## **BIBLE 101: WHAT IS THE SUBJECT AND PRIMARY THEME?**

*Exodus 6:2-8; I Peter 2:9-10*

Last Sunday with the dedication of new sanctuary Bibles I launched a sermon series titled “Bible 101” and I began with the question, “What is the Bible and how did it come to be?” I concluded that message by saying, “The Bible is more than a collection of sixty-six books with a long and unique history. It is “one of the most available and extraordinary means by which (we as) humans are brought into proximity with the divine.”<sup>1</sup> That points to the answer to today’s question, “What is the subject of the Bible and its primary theme?”

The biblical text isn’t just some dusty, ancient book of stories written long ago in a far off land. The Bible is the very story of God at work in our lives. The first line of the story of God is “*In the beginning*”, and even if we were to read the Bible all the way through to the very last verse in Revelation which reads, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints*” (22:29), it is a story that has yet to reach “The End”. What I mean is that the Bible is not a dead document - it is alive with God. God is still speaking. Even though the Bible was written twenty plus centuries ago, it has everything to do with a living God who wants to be known, who wants to be in relationship with us, who wants to infuse and transform our lives and our relationships with love, with grace.

Ultimately the Bible tells the story of God pursuing a relationship with humanity. This is the emphasis of today’s scripture readings. To the Israelites God says, “*I will take you as my people, and I will be your God*” (Ex. 6:6). To the early Christians, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God says “*Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people.*” (I Peter 2:10)

The biblical word for this relationship that God pursues with us is the English word “covenant.” Now when we use the word covenant we tend to think of a mutual agreement between two equal parties, like the covenant of marriage. That’s not the case when we examine the Hebrew word, “*berith*”, translated as “covenant” in the biblical text. *Berith* means a commitment entered into by one partner in favor of the other. So the Bible is the story of God taking the initiative with humanity, the story of God’s unilateral promise and commitment to us, the story of God’s fidelity and faithfulness. By establishing a *berith*, a covenant first with the Israelites and then all people through the coming of Christ, God declares, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

From beginning to end what is so amazing about the Bible is that it is the story of God who wants to be in relationship with us, with you, with me, with all of humanity. It is a story of God's perseverance and persistence, fidelity and faithfulness to that relationship. Let me briefly recount <sup>2</sup> the story for you:

In the beginning, God created the planet and populated it with life. God placed in this world human beings. They were created in God's own image and were created for close relationship with God. But these first humans, being free to love, broke the relationship – turned away from God, their life now a mere shadow of the healthy, joyful, and satisfying life that God intended for them.

Despite the pain of rejection, God still loved the people and longed for them to experience the deep and enjoyable relationship with God that was originally purposed. So God provided a solution by creating a nation through which God would bless all humankind. God promised to Abraham that his and Sarah's descendents would bring spiritual blessings to the world. This nation would be known as Israel. Their relationship with God, with each other, and with the world around them would be ethical, moral, just and pure. God guided Israel to a new land of their own where they would exist as a nation and grow in their relationship with God as God's people.

Over the next several hundred years, it was a rocky relationship. The people struggled to remain faithful to God. With the poor leadership of various kings the nation plummeted downward into chaos. The end result was exile in Babylon. Despite their unfaithfulness, God continued to love them and tried to call them back to relationship and to their reason for being - a just and loving people, a light to the nations. God spoke through spiritual leaders called prophets for this purpose and with the hope that they "would love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8), but to no avail.

After many generations God stepped into humanity and into history in the very flesh and person of Jesus, a descendent of Abraham. Through his life, healing and teaching, Jesus, God's Beloved Son, showed people what a good relationship with God looked like and how it was lived out in relationship with others. Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God – a revolutionary way of living, like loving your enemies and feeding the hungry, which would bring real healing to relationships and to the world. Jesus willingly chose to suffer a brutal innocent death that absorbed and paid for all time humanity's unfaithfulness to God and God's command to love. Three days after he was buried, his tomb was found empty. He conquered death and came back to life, offering the possibility for all people to enter into relationship with God.

Those who witnessed Jesus' resurrection brought the good news of the kingdom of God, the good news of a restored relationship with God, and the good news of grace and forgiveness to the entire world. In a nutshell, the Bible is the story of God taking the initiative to have a lasting relationship with humanity. It is the story of God ever pursuing that relationship. It is the story of God loving humanity no matter how many times the people rejected God's love and God's way for the world. And it is the story of how that broken relationship is forever healed through the life of Jesus.

In answer to our Bible 101 question, what is the subject and primary theme of the Bible, a succinct as possible answer is, the Bible is the story of God pursuing a relationship with humanity. So when we read the Bible the primary message is that God loves us so much that God wants to be in relationship with us and wants that relationship and our relationship to self and others to be healthy and whole, joyful and life-affirming. To know that God wants to be in relationship with me and has pursued me in Christ is good news. Is it good news for you?

It was very good news for a man named Francis Thompson<sup>3</sup> who was a drug addict and whose life had spiraled down into poverty and despair. Fortunately, he was befriended by the editor of a Catholic literary magazine who recognized his creative genius. On more than one occasion he and his family arranged for Thompson to spend extended periods in monasteries as a means of helping their prodigy overcome his opium addiction. It was while on retreat at one of these monasteries that Thompson composed his most famous poem, the autobiographical "*Hound of Heaven*". The poem tells his story, the story of a life spent running from God and how God does not abandon him, but rather pursues him. The poem pictures God like an old bloodhound sniffing Thompson's scent, always in the distance, occasionally letting out a howl to remind him that God is on his trail. Here's the poem's most well-known stanza:

"I fled Him down the nights and down the days.  
I fled Him down the arches of the years.  
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways  
of my own mind, and in the midst of tears  
I hid from him."

As the poem goes on, Thompson says he fled "across the margins of the world" but the refrain always comes back with these words:

"Still with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

Came on the following feet, and a Voice above their beat.”

The poem expresses Thompson's experience of the love and power of God; a God who sought him out and seeks out all wandering children and will never abandon them, regardless of what they have done or how far they have fallen; a God whose power is such that it helped Thompson keep his addiction at bay and rise out of his destitution and produce for years superb poetry.

Friends, the Bible is the story of God as always there, always pursuing, always loving us. It is the story of God who is for us, who ever goes the road with us. It is the story of God who wants to be in relationship with us, who makes covenant with us saying, *“I will live in (you) and walk among (you), and I will be (your) God, and (you) shall be my people”* (2 Corinthians 6:16b). This is good news. Alleluia! Amen!

#### NOTES:

1. Gomes, Peter J., *The Good Book*, William and Moore and Company, Inc., 1996, p.351.
2. Adapted from “A Story of Relationships”, TruthMedia.com 2004.
3. Michael Daniel, “Francis Thompson: author of the Hound of Heaven”. *AD2000* Vol 13 No 4 (May 2000), p. 12