

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 10 - Seeing the forest

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

Whenever we feel the urge to rush to scrutinize or hold up any one particular Bible verse, we need to simultaneously have in mind that any microscopic view needs to be tempered by a 20,000-foot view of the Bible in which that verse exists.

[Main content]

Early in our marriage, my wife Carolyn and I, like many new couples, didn't have much money. We were renting a very small 800 square-foot house with no air conditioning and furniture mostly inherited from our parents. One year we used our tax return to buy one of our first nice-things-- a large, secondhand cedar chest. We transported it to our home and while we were moving it in, I caused some very slight damage to it. I was so mad at myself. For the next year all I could see when I looked at it was the small nick I had caused in the wood. And, yes, that was the extent of the damage, a very small nick. My obsession over that nick in the wood dulled my ability to fully appreciate the beauty of its craftsmanship, the wonderful smell every time it was opened, and the utility of its large storage capacity. All I could see was that nick in the wood!

When we approach the Bible, we must also be on guard against focusing only on the few, specific verses that capture our attention whether in joy or in shock. It is the old adage of being careful that you can't see the forest for the trees. For many Christians, they lock their stare onto a handful of verse trees every time they approach the Bible forest. No matter the motivation, such an approach usually takes the verses out of context causing one to lose sight of the fact that the Bible forest is filled with countless trees.

Pursuing this broad understanding helps us to start creating a simple map of the Bible's content and nature to help us understand when we look at isolated verses where we are in the Bible's vast geography. We need the ability to pull back and see in context where we are in relation to the lay of the land as a whole when we're looking at a handful of verses. It would be akin to when you zoom in and out on Google Maps. People will zoom in at times on Google Maps to

see the area as closely as possible but no one leaves their view at maximum zoom-in all the time. If you did, you'd make it much harder to understand what's around you in context to where you are and where you want to go.

One way to map the Bible would be to have some familiarity with a summary of the entire Bible, even better would be creating your own summary of the Bible. I realize that may sound daunting but hear me out. First, we don't begin our own summaries of the Bible by copying or memorizing someone else's. We begin that task when we ask big-picture questions every time we approach scripture-- questions like, "How does this passage fit into the author's purpose?" and "How does the book, which this passage is in, fit into the Bible as a whole?" We probably won't know the answers most of the time. But if we stay aware there is a bigger picture and work to find those answers as we can, it'll help keep us centered and eventually help us have a better understanding of the Bible as a whole.

I stated in the first episode that this initial season of The Chaos Ladder would "help you learn how to wrap your brain around the Bible as a whole." So it seemed appropriate to me that I end this season with a summary of the Bible. And that's exactly what I'm going to do by spending the remainder of this episode sharing my current summary of the Bible. A few things about my summary, though, before I start.

- First, I consider it a living summary meaning that it changes as my understanding of the Bible has changed over the years. I highly anticipate it will change in the years to come. In fact, I revised it as I prepared for this episode.
- Second, my summary of the Bible is a summary of the Bible. I want you to hear it as simply one possible summary based on my experiences.
- Third, my summary might be longer than what you care to tackle. My initial one I wrote almost 10 years ago was only one paragraph. But like I said earlier, if you decide to tackle this, begin just by asking yourself those big picture questions everytime you approach scripture. And when, or if, you decide to start working out your own summary of the Bible, just begin with a paragraph or so and then let it grow, or not, as you feel led from there.

Ok, so here is a summary of the Bible:

The Bible is a collection of ancient and inspired faith writings. Christians call its oldest books the Old Testament and they are the same books as the Jewish Scriptures (but in a different order). They are ancient Israel's stories of their origin and history, its laws and teachings meant to honor God, and the call of its prophets to turn back to God when they strayed from what God desired of them. The books of the Old Testament were written, amended, and re-written by ancient Israelites over a span of about 800 years. Taken together, the books express the ancient Israelites' struggles, victories, and failings, but most importantly they reveal the journey of ancient Israel's evolved understanding of who God is and what they believed it meant to be God's people. Their lessons included the following: their progression that the God they served and worshipped was not the greatest of many gods but is in fact the one and only God; that God

was present not only in the Temple but wherever they could gather; and that controlling and possessing the land of Palestine was not the measure of their faithfulness but whether there was love and justice for all people.

Some 200 years after the last book of the Old Testament was completed, First-century Christians accepted the Jewish scriptures as their own inspired scripture while also adding to their story by adopting new writings which would become the books of the New Testament. Chronologically speaking, the earliest of these writings were the letters which Paul actually wrote, then the four Gospels, and after that the other writings in the New Testament, all of them being written from approximately the middle of the first century through the early second century.

Paul wrote or dictated only approximately seven of the 13 letters attributed to him. Each of the ones he wrote were motivated by responding to a myriad of conflicts those churches were each encountering. But collectively, Paul's letters reveal a recurring theme which was a new and foundational theology of understanding the person and purpose of Jesus. Paul accepted the Jewish scriptures as sacred while imaginatively reinterpreting them in places in light of Jesus' death and resurrection in order to express how believers in Christ are connected to and have descended from God's promises and work in the people of Israel. He articulated the call given to all people to confess and live a life in Christ which included the scandalous idea of claiming Jesus, though executed as a criminal, was risen to be our Lord and Savior. Paul's transformative thinking makes Jesus the cornerstone on which followers are called to resist forcing *uniformity* of our preferred religious practices and instead embrace the broad and inclusive *unity* found only in Christ-- a unity that welcomes and affirms all equally as part of God's people just as they are.

After Paul's letters, the Early Churches wanted and needed to memorialize the stories of Jesus so the four Gospel writers each created their own portrait of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The unifying theme for all four is how Jesus is both the fulfillment and continuation of the story of ancient Israel. Jesus continues the story by establishing God's reign through his actions and teachings while simultaneously making God's reign available to all people then, and thereafter, who choose to follow Him. This reign, or "kingdom of God" as Jesus often calls it, is based in Jesus' teachings. Jesus, a practicing Jew Himself, re-centers portions of the Jewish scriptures by emphasizing its call to prioritize extending love, mercy, aid, and inclusion toward others while challenging all interpretations that resulted in religious practices that unjustly hurt, marginalized, or hindered others. Jesus not only taught this in word but practiced it in deed in his interaction with people on the various margins of his society.

The remaining New Testament writings, believed early on to be written by or at least influenced by the Apostles, are the testaments of writers from various Early Christian churches which, similar to much of the Jewish scriptures, re-engage the struggles, victories, failures, and evolution of living out the Spirit's call to be God's people, only now as followers of Jesus.

Though inspired by God's Holy Spirit, the writers of all the Bible's books were also conveying "personal, social, and national experiences" through the lens of how *they* perceived God. As such, the writers, the faith heroes about whom they wrote, and the teachings they shared were

at times “out of harmony with (God’s) revelation.” But even though the Bible is not “a verbatim record of (God’s) revelation,” God is still revealed through the Bible.¹ We see it in the progression of how they grew to understand who God is and what God desires. But the greatest revelation of God in the Bible is that Jesus is the greatest *living* revelation of God. Collectively, these revelations in the books of the Bible have provided a trajectory for each generation to take up and continue the progression in growth to understand how the Holy Spirit is revealing who God is and what God desires.

And that’s my summary of the Bible... for now.

This episode closes this first season of The Chaos Ladder. As far as where The Chaos Ladder goes from here, if it’s determined there’s a need or desire for more of this podcast, I hope to do another season which would cover what the Bible teaches us about various topics. So if I return, I hope you’ll join me then. Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. And as always, take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.

¹ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, (1973), p. 614