

## Introduction

Good story telling requires a good plot—unless you’re Garrison Keillor or Seinfeld. Both hosted shows that never really had a plot. That might explain why I never really enjoyed either one. I do enjoy reading epic sci-fi / fantasy novels. One of my favorite fantasy series is called “The Wheel of Time” by Robert Jordan. It’s a massive series—consisting of fourteen books. The shortest is 528 pages long; most are 600-800 pages long. I found the storytelling to be compelling, but then after six or seven books it seemed as though the author had lost his own plot. New characters were being added and they seemed to take over the story, as the main characters would often only show up occasionally.

Sadly, Robert Jordan died before finishing the series. Happily, Brandon Sanderson, perhaps my favorite author, finished the series with a trilogy drawn from Jordan’s copious notes. These were, frankly, the best three books of the series. Through these books, the fullness of the plot was discovered. The final battle between good and evil at the end was truly far bigger than any of the main characters realized, which Jordan revealed along the way while *seeming* to lose the plot.

What made the very lengthy story so compelling—nearly 10,000 pages total!—was the coherence of the story. Even though there were many moving parts and at times it was difficult to keep all the characters straight (wait...is she a bad guy? do I like him? were they the people who were doing that bad thing?), when the story came together fully in the final book, I gasped as I read the last page. I was blown away by the ending. It was so perfect and made so much sense and while I should have seen it coming, I was still shocked and surprised—and *delighted* by it.

When it comes to the Bible, it’s not hard to see a plot that is even more complex, with stories that seem to be all over the place. There’s a guy who fights a giant. There’s a guy who gets shipwrecked. There’s a guy who kills another guy with a sword. There’s a guy who battles a creature of unusual size. Wait. That’s “The Princess Bride”, isn’t it? Nope! That’s David, Paul, Ehud, and Jonah!

There’s the story of creation, of the exodus from Egypt. There’s war and intrigue. There’s love poetry and stories of miracles. There’s lots of religious rules given and unexpected people who do unexpectedly great things. The stories span hundreds—*thousands*—of years and are all over the place. There is a plot, however. There is a single thread pulling all these seemingly disparate stories together.

You might be wondering what that single plot is. What is the thread that pulls together all these stories? This thread is woven from the opening pages of Genesis through the final verses of Revelation. It is this: God is seeking a home for himself. Today is Pentecost, the day on which we celebrate God’s accomplishment of building a home for himself.

## The Presence of God

In order to understand the significance of Pentecost, we have to go back—way back. There was a shepherd watching his sheep one night. It was an otherwise ordinary night until something caught his eye. Moses recorded it this way:

Ex 3:2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup> Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Exodus 3:2–5

Fire does one of two things. It either consumes or destroys a thing, or it purifies a thing. The bush was not burned up so the fire here purifies. Notice God tells Moses he is standing on holy ground. The space has been purified. It has been made fit for God’s presence.

The outcome of this initial encounter with Moses was the exodus from Egypt. God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in order to fulfill his promises to Abraham. When they left Egypt the physical descendants of Abraham were joined by a mixed multitude. They wandered in the desert for a while, but they were being led to a specific place. Notice *how* they were being led.

Ex 13:21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

Exodus 13:21

In order to be seen, God appeared either as smoke—a cloud—or as fire. Whether night or day they could see the manifestation of the presence of God among them. As the pillar traveled, so they followed. The Lord was leading them to Mount Sinai. Together the physical descendants of Abraham and the mixed multitude became the people of Israel when God made a covenant with them. Notice once again how God appeared to them:

Ex 19:18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. <sup>19</sup> And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. <sup>20</sup> The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Exodus 19:18–20

Imagine the scene. Once again God descends in fire, for fire purifies. Thus Mount Sinai is made holy. There was thick smoke all around. The mountain shakes at the presence of God. Imagine the noise. There was something like a trumpet and thunder crashing all around

them. Think of how frightening this would be. The earth is shaking. The atmosphere feels extremely unstable, with the cloud and the thunder and the fire. *And then God shows up.*

The entire people of Israel were assembled together at the foot of this mountain. They had been warned they were not to set foot on the mountain, for God is holy and they were not. Only Moses is called to the top of the mountain to experience the presence of God directly, for God was giving an incredible gift to his people. If they would keep his law and do the things the law required, God would continue to dwell among them.

While Moses was on the mountain receiving the instructions from God, Israel remained at the base of the mountain, breaking those very instructions. The number one rule for this covenantal relationship between God and Israel was simple: they were to have no other gods. None. In a world that worshiped gods made of wood and stone and metal, Israel would stand alone in worshiping the one true God, but without making images of him. After giving them the basic rules—the Ten Commandments—Moses returned to the mountain to continue receiving instruction from God.

While Moses was on the mountain the people decided to break the number one rule. They gave to Aaron their gold and he made them a golden calf. Aaron, Israel's first high priest, actually said to them, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." God's righteous anger was provoked at this so he told Moses he would destroy the people of Israel. In their place he would make a great nation of Moses, and the people of Moses, not Israel, would be his people. Moses, however, pleaded with God for mercy so God relented. He did not destroy them, but he said this:

Ex 33:1 The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' <sup>2</sup> I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>3</sup> Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

<sup>4</sup> When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

Exodus 33:1–4

What the people wanted more than anything else was a land of their own. They wanted this more than they wanted God. They wanted his blessings, not him. They would take his rescue, but not his rules. They would receive his blessings but not his requirements. God offered to give them what they wanted. He would give them the land of Canaan, and even promised to bless the land. When the land was said to be a land flowing with milk and honey, this is because God *makes it* flow with milk and honey. It is a land of rock. Stones everywhere. It is a desert. The only way it can flow with milk and honey is if God causes it to rain and causes the grass to grow and causes the flowers to grow. God offers to send them into this land and to continue blessing them, but he himself would not go with them.

Notice what Moses calls this: a *disastrous word*. It is when God essentially names what they truly desire—his blessings apart from him—they realize the brokenness of their desire. It is when he threatens to remove his presence from them that they realize how terrible such a thing would be. God's blessings without God are essentially worthless.

Once again Moses pleads with God. He boldly proclaims to the Lord the necessity of his presence with his people.

Ex 33:12 Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’<sup>13</sup> Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”<sup>14</sup> And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”<sup>15</sup> And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.<sup>16</sup> For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?”

<sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Exodus 33:12–17

Here Moses reveals what makes Israel a unique and distinct people on earth: the presence of God among them. If God’s presence were not among them, they would be just another people. They would still have the law of Moses, but they would be no different from other nations. They would still have God’s blessing, but God causes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Moses now understands what makes them *the* people of God: God’s presence among them.

Moses now also understands the real purpose of the exodus. It was not a land. If it were merely land to call their own, being sent into the land and given promises of blessings without his presence among them would fulfill the purpose of such an exodus. The exodus from Egypt was not an exodus merely to *land*. Yes, God would fulfill the promises concerning the land of Canaan, but the land and its blessings was always secondary to God’s real purpose in rescuing Israel from Egypt: God would dwell among them. John Oswalt wrote a marvelous paper last year, in which he explained the purpose for the exodus and for all the promises of God.

But what was Yahweh’s goal in all of this? Was it to produce an obedient people? No, it was to produce a kind of people among whom he can walk—live—without destroying them. Oftentimes when persons are asked what the purpose of the Exodus was, they will answer that it was to get the people out of Egypt and into Canaan. But what does the structure of the book of Exodus tell us? The purpose of the exodus and of the Sinai covenant was the tabernacle! The purpose was that God might come down off the mountain and take up his residence in the Holy Place in the middle of the camp. This was what he had been aiming for ever since the sin of Adam and Eve had forced them from his presence in the Garden. The truth is that he does not so much want to walk with us as to walk within us.

John N. Oswalt, “Holiness: God’s Goal For Human Life”, JETS 66.2 (2023): 267–78

We see this purpose in how the book of Exodus ends.

Ex 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. <sup>35</sup> And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. <sup>36</sup> Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. <sup>37</sup> But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. <sup>38</sup> For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

Exodus 40:34–38

This was the purpose of the exodus, of the miracles, of the promises. God desired to dwell among his people. The problem was the covenant he gave them at Sinai could not change them. It could not make them holy. It could not actually purify them to be a dwelling fit for the Lord. It provided a means for God's presence. The system of sacrifices and the rules for ritual purity enabled a holy God to dwell among them—but only temporarily and only at a distance. God's desire was greater than this, so he promised a new covenant.

## Pentecost

As we know, to fulfill his promise of a new covenant God became one of us and lived the life of a faithful human on behalf of all his people. Then one night he shared a meal with his disciples and told them he himself was the sacrifice that ushers in the new covenant. He gave them bread to eat and said it was his body. He gave them a cup to drink and said it was his blood. He was arrested, falsely accused, falsely convicted, and shed his blood for our sins. Then, on the third day, *he walked out of his tomb*.

Forty days later he ascended into heaven. Remember, though, why God promised a new covenant. His desire from the very beginning was to dwell among his people. After ushering in the new covenant he ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. He had told his disciples, however, to wait in Jerusalem. They waited for ten days.

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of

Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome,<sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”<sup>12</sup> And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”<sup>13</sup> But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Acts 2:1–13

Notice Luke says the day of Pentecost had arrived. We tend to think of this particular Pentecost, but the people of Israel had been celebrating Pentecost for centuries. The second great feast God gave Israel was the Feast of Weeks. Beginning the day after Passover they would observe seven weeks of celebrating the harvest. Seven weeks is, of course, 49 days. Passover plus 49 days equals 50 days. The word Pentecost means “fiftieth”. Israel celebrated Passover, which was the day on which God *passed over* Israel in judgment, and then they spent the next 49 days celebrating the harvest.

While the disciples were waiting together in one place, Pentecost arrived. Suddenly there was a loud noise, “a mighty rushing wind” that filled the entire house they were in. Then “tongues of fire” appeared on each of them. Remember what fire does: it either destroys or it purifies. The disciples didn’t die from the fire so it’s clear this fire symbolized the presence of God. The disciples are suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and they begin speaking in foreign languages.

Keep in mind they were Galileans. They had funny accents from the north. They sounded uneducated to nearly everyone else. They were not, for the most part, educated people. Yes, they were literate, but no one would mistake any of them for a scholar.

In verse 5 Luke tells us there were men in Jerusalem at the time, “devout men from every nation under heaven”. They were in town to celebrate Passover at the temple and many would have remained until Pentecost. Notice what Luke says in verse 6. “And at this *sound* the multitude came together”. What sound? He said in verse 2 a sound came from heaven like a mighty rushing wind. The people outside the house heard the sound, too! When they came to check out what was going on they heard the disciples speaking in their own languages!

Each person was hearing them speak, but in his own language. These Jews were from all over the world. They were part of the Jewish Diaspora. They spoke the languages of whatever nation they were from. They would also have spoken Greek, because that was the language of the empire, but rather than hearing them speak in Greek, they heard them in their native languages. The miracle wasn’t so much in the apostles’ tongues, but in the hearers’ ears. Luke lists them in geographical order around the empire.

They were Parthians and Medes and Elamites. They were from Mesopotamia and Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia, and from Egypt and Libya and Rome. They were Jews and converts to Judaism. They wonder what is going on. Why all this noise like a mighty rushing wind? Why are their flames of fire on their heads? Why are they speaking in all these languages *at the same time*? Wait. Are they drunk? (As if that would explain it! No one thinks of Barney Gumble on “the Simpsons” as the town polyglot!) Peter stands up and speaks to them.

Acts 2:14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you,

and give ear to my words. <sup>15</sup> For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. <sup>16</sup> But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> ““And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; <sup>18</sup> even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup> And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; <sup>20</sup> the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. <sup>21</sup> And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Acts 2:14–21

Peter says this prophecy of Joel is now fulfilled in their midst. Notice the language of the prophecy. Fire and smoke and wonders. The sun will be darkened and the moon turned to blood. Even more, the Spirit of God would be poured out on men and women—even on male and female servants. This is the promise that “they shall all know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest”. This is the fulfillment of the new covenant, for God had, indeed, come to dwell among his people.

Notice, however, his dwelling is not a physical location for the fire is not in a bush and it is not in the tabernacle and it is not in the temple in Jerusalem. The purifying fire that enables the presence of God *is on his people*. His people are now *purified*. They are now *holy*. The new covenant does what the old could not. The old covenant given at Sinai could only make allowance for God’s presence. The new covenant makes his people fit for his dwelling, and it does so *permanently*. Now the dwelling place of God is with his people forevermore.

## The Gift

Think of what is happening right here, right now. We have assembled together in the name of the Lord Jesus, and he is fulfilling his promise that when two more assemble in his name, *there he is*. He’s God, so he’s everywhere so either Jesus is being Captain Obvious or he means he is present in a different way. This room is not a holy room, yet it is where God dwells on earth when his people assemble in his name. When they do, God enters into their midst in a unique and powerful way.

The author of Hebrews tells us we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Who are these witnesses? They are those who are currently with the Lord. He contrasts the present experience of Christ’s church with the experience of those assembled at Mount Sinai.

Heb 12:18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup> and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup> For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” <sup>21</sup> Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” <sup>22</sup> But you have come to Mount Zion and to

the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:18–24

The author, inspired by the Holy Spirit to write holy Scripture, declares Moses himself was frightened at Mount Sinai. Moses understood God is holy and he and the people of Israel were not. The warning was clear: if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be killed. The reason it must be stoned is the animal got too close to holiness for ordinary folk to even touch it in order to kill it. It must be killed without touching it, for to touch it would also be to get too close to that same holiness.

Our experience is different, he says. We, too, come to a holy mountain, only it is the heavenly Jerusalem. It is more that the holy mountain *comes to us*. We are surrounded by angels who are celebrating the Lord Jesus. We are surrounded by the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. They are those who died in faith prior to the coming of Jesus. We are surrounded by the spirits of the righteous made perfect. These are all who have died in faith in Christ. He adds that we have come to God, *the judge of all*.

Moses was allowed into God's holy presence, yet Moses was not struck down. Still, Moses trembled with fear, for God is holy and he was not. How can we bear the presence of God *the judge of all*? We do not tremble in fear the way Moses trembled in fear, for we have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. His blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel cries out for vengeance. The blood of Jesus cries out, "It is finished. Vengeance has been exhausted. God's wrath has run its course and his mercy and grace flow now in its place!"

Church, this is the new covenant! We are new covenant people! The purifying fire of the Holy Spirit has made and continues to make us into a dwelling fit for God himself. This is the plot of the entire Bible! All the various stories it contains all point to this one thread, that God in Christ through his Spirit is working to establish his presence among his people.

The Bible begins in a garden, with God walking among his people. Inexplicably the man rebelled and they were cast out of the garden and out of God's presence, for he is holy and they were not. Then God sacrificed animals to cover their nakedness. The first man rebelled against God in a garden. Then we move to another garden where another man faces temptation. This time, the man is the Son of God in human form. In a very different garden he says, "Not my will, but yours." Then he is arrested, beaten, falsely convicted, and crucified. The Bible ends in a garden! At the end, when the Lord Jesus returns and recreates the world, the garden that once was will cover the entire earth and all of God's people will dwell on it, but not alone:

Rev 21:2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and



death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Revelation 21:2–4

Do you see the plot? Do you see the thread that weaves throughout the entire Bible? Do you see what God in Christ through his Spirit has been up to from the very beginning? It was necessary for God to become one of us, for this was a significant part of the story of God. Christ had to become *our* Passover Lamb. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5 Christ, *our Passover lamb*, has been crucified. He did it. He accomplished what the law given at Sinai could not. Rather than covering up the sins of his people, as the sacrifices in the law did, Christ takes away our sin. In doing so he purifies us. He makes us holy.

<sup>2</sup> Cor 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

The Lord Jesus didn’t merely make an *allowance* for his presence among us. We become the righteousness of God. He has been working since before the foundation of the world to make us his people. *We become the righteousness of God*. This is how he makes us into a dwelling place for God on earth. This is what the Lord is doing in salvation!

In Christ God has been reaping a harvest ever since that first Pentecost when the Spirit came down. The Lord Jesus told his apostles to make disciples of every nation, and his church has been growing ever since. It is still Pentecost. The real celebration of the Feast of Weeks, of the harvest God is reaping, continues and will continue. That harvest is *your* life. It’s easy to point to others, to say the harvest is people coming to faith—and it is, but the harvest is also your faith in Christ growing. As we sang earlier, every day we become “a little more like Jesus”.

This is the promise of the gospel. This is the thread woven throughout all of Scripture. This is the plot God has been working toward from the beginning. You might be thinking, “Okay, great. Now what?” That’s great stuff there, but so what?

Pentecost means God is with you. Part of God’s story—your story—is painful. Part of your story is difficult and troublesome. Through it all God is with you, for this is what he’s been working toward for all of human history.

There will continue to be pain and heartache in this life. The promise of all Scripture, the very plot of the Bible, is that during the pain and heartache the Lord will be with you. There will continue to be suffering and hardship in this life. The promise of God in Christ is that through his Spirit, God will continue to be with you. The purifying fire of the Holy Spirit continues to make you a dwelling fit for the Lord. When loved ones die and the test results are bad and the children are overwhelming and the bills keep piling up, through it all is this promise: I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Pentecost truly is the gift that keeps on giving, for God in Christ through his Spirit continues to give himself to us. Pentecost shows that the gospel is not about “land”. It’s not about a destination—heaven when you die. Salvation is about receiving the greatest gift God could possibly have given: himself. Pentecost is the reception of that gift.