

Overview of God's Activity Throughout Human History

Objective: By the conclusion of this chapter, we will recognize the crucial steps that God has taken to maintain His relationship to humanity.

The First Chapters of Genesis Introduce Us to the Pattern of God's Activity

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are a prologue to the more detailed Scripture which begins in chapter 12. The information in this prologue is very compressed. There isn't enough detail there to satisfy our scientific curiosity about how creation happened. There aren't enough historical details to tell us about the development of the human race since creation. Rather, the first eleven chapters of the Bible have a more important purpose — to introduce us to the pattern of God's activity in relation to humanity.

God Directs Human Affairs In Order to Accomplish His Purposes

The pattern which begins in the prologue continues through the pages of Scripture. It is important that students of the Scriptures see the big picture of God's activity. For example, we discovered in chapter 2 of this booklet that God is a missionary God, reaching out to fallen humanity in order to draw individuals back into a loving relationship with Himself. God made incredible promises to His human creation and He will eventually fulfill all of these promises. As God moved history toward the accomplishment of His purposes He had to overcome the disobedience and lack of cooperation of His people. At several crucial points in time it was necessary for God to intervene in and redirect human affairs so that His purposes would stay on track. As we study God's activity in history we will learn some important lessons about missions.

The Study of Scripture Must Begin With God

We must begin this study "before the beginning," that is, in eternity before there was time. The Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, were there because they are eternal in nature. They are self-existent; they are complete in themselves, and yet they chose to create the universe. We don't exactly know why God chose to create the physical universe outside of Himself.

Whatever the reason, God decided to create time, space, the galaxies, this little planet that we live on called earth, the animal life and vegetable life which fills our earth, and finally, as the climatic act and high point of the creative process, mankind.

God Established the Pattern of His Activity Very Early in Human History

It was at this very beginning of human history that God established the pattern of His activity. God could have brought into existence multitudes of people, but He didn't. He started with one individual, Adam. In Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 and 28, "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" "The LORD God formed the man (Adam) from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Of course, we can't establish a pattern with only one example. However, it is important to recognize what is going to happen. We're going to find that at several crucial stages in the history of the human race, God selected specific individuals and assigned a responsibility to them. According to this strategy, God's purposes on earth would be accomplished as these individuals faithfully carried out their assignments.

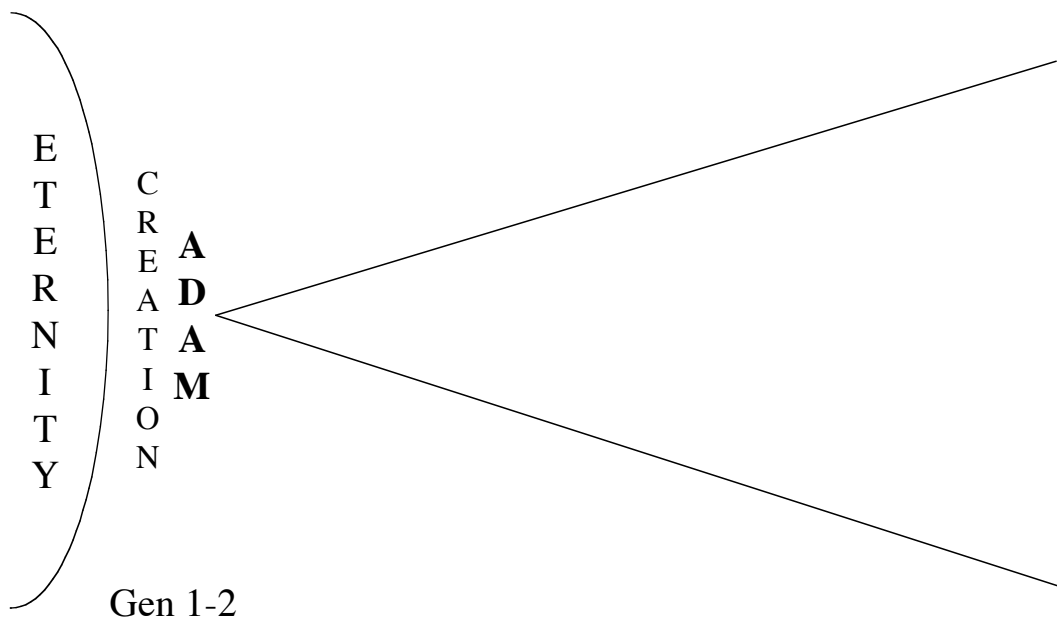
The Responsibilities Assigned to Adam and Eve

Adam with Eve were to reproduce themselves, "to be fruitful and increase in number, to fill the earth" with their offspring. As certain natural processes worked themselves out over time, there would be a growing population to "subdue the earth" and "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living creature that moved on the ground." "God blessed them (them being male and female - Adam and Eve) and said to them. 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" Adam and Eve and their descendants were responsible for the well being of all the creatures on the earth. They were delegated to be stewards for God. They were to be in partnership with God, using the resources that God provided in order to carry out their responsibilities (see 1:29-30).

God had provided humanity with the privilege and opportunity to glorify Him through service. His purposes would be accomplished on the earth through their cooperation. Men and women were to organize things and to maintain, in an orderly way, life on earth for the glory and honor of God.

We can diagram what we have been talking about in this way:

Overview of God's Pattern of Dealing with Humanity



The Great Crisis in Human Experience

We don't know how long Adam and Eve continued to function in a God-pleasing way. We only know that in Genesis chapter 3 a major crisis developed.

The LORD God had planted one tree in this garden in Eden which would be a test of their obedience. This tree was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the tempter came to the woman in Chapter 3, verse 5, he referred to this particular tree in this way: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The Consequence of Disobedience

Up to this point, I'm not sure that Adam and Eve could have distinguished between things that were good and things that were bad or evil. They were living in a perfect environment — an environment that was as good as God wanted it to be.

Let's reflect on their situation for a moment. Before their temptation Adam and Eve only experienced perfection and goodness. They did not have to make value judgments or to choose between options that would be good or bad, or even between good, better, or best. They could not appreciate the goodness that they had because there was no basis of comparison — until they lost their state of perfection. Then they suddenly could distinguish between the goodness they previously had and the badness into which they had fallen. They recognized their great sense of loss only after the change in their situation.

The tempter was correct when he said, "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The LORD God had not intended Adam and Eve to have this kind of knowledge. The tempter implied that this knowledge would be a step forward in their experience, but it proved to be a tragic step backward for all humanity. "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.'"

The Burden of Making Correct Choices: Two Examples

From that point on human beings have carried a tremendous burden of responsibility for their own behavior. People acquired the ability to distinguish things that were good from things that were evil. If people were logical, they would make good choices and avoid bad choices. Consider the wild animals at a circus; they can be trained to do some amazing things. In their training, they are conditioned in their behavior in a very simple way: they are rewarded for good actions and punished for bad actions. This is what God does with sinful humanity. After Genesis chapter 3 the members of the human race were responsible for their behavior. They were expected to live according to their sense of right and wrong. This is called the human conscience. How did it work out in actuality?

The Bad Example

From chapter 1 we understand that Adam and Eve were created in God's own image. This fact is repeated in Genesis 5:1. However, in 5:3 we are informed that Adam reproduced himself in his own fallen image. The consequences of this fallen image are described in Genesis 4. We read that Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, had a problem of anger. The LORD explained to Cain that he would have to decide which way to go (see 4:6-7), and even though Cain knew in advance what the consequences of his actions would be, he let his anger influence his behavior and he killed his brother Abel. Cain did not follow his conscience, and made an evil choice. As punishment, he and his many descendents lived outside the presence of the LORD.

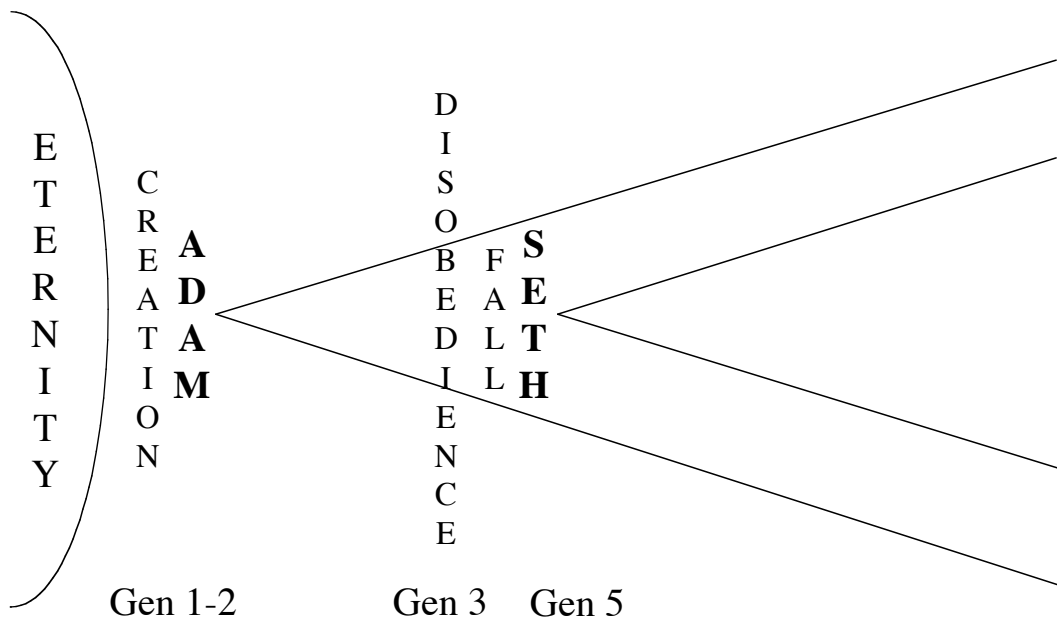
The Good Example

On the other hand, we have a good example in Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. The very last verse in Chapter 4 tells us that when he fathered a son, named Enosh, "at that time men began to call on the name of the LORD". This verse can also be translated: "they began to proclaim the name of the LORD." Seth and his descendents formed a Godly remnant in the midst of the increasing numbers of people on the planet. They were a positive influence among the multitudes. By calling on and proclaiming the name of the LORD, they were witnesses of God and helped to guide human behavior. They were like salt and light in their generations. They were the conscience of humanity, helping people to make godly choices.

Seth is the second example of the pattern of God’s activity, which is the theme of this chapter. God selected him as the key individual to spearhead a movement, just as God had selected Adam. These men were given the incredible privilege to serve and honor God, and God intended His purposes on earth to be accomplished as these individuals faithfully carried out their assignments.

We can add another section to our diagram:

Overview of God’s Pattern of Dealing with Humanity



The Next Crisis of Human History

How long did the descendents of Seth continue to serve God, to be a godly influence in the world? We can only guess. However, by Chapter 6 we have another crisis point. The general description of the situation before the flood is in chapter 6, verse 11. “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.” Apparently as the generations moved along in time, the descendents of Seth became careless about their responsibility to honor God and they conformed to the ways of the world rather than being agents of change within the world.

God had to do something about the problems on earth. In verse 5 we read, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” And it tells us that “The LORD was grieved that He had made man on the earth,” and in verse 7, “He decided to wipe mankind, whom He had created, from the face of the earth, along with the animals, the creatures that crawled along the ground and the birds of the air.”

A New Beginning on a Cleansed Earth

There is a note of hope in verse 8, “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” Noah was selected by God to launch a new beginning on a cleansed earth. He is the next key individual to initiate a movement of service to God. Following the flood, Noah and his descendents became the guardians and custodians of God’s cause. They became the ones to direct peoples’ attention to the living God. The new beginnings are described to us in Chapter 9. The words that God used to bless Noah and his wife, and their sons and their wives, are remarkably similar to the blessing that God spoke to Adam a few chapters earlier, “As for you, be fruitful, increase in number, multiply on the earth, increase upon it” (9:1, 7).

The Control of Violence Through Accountability

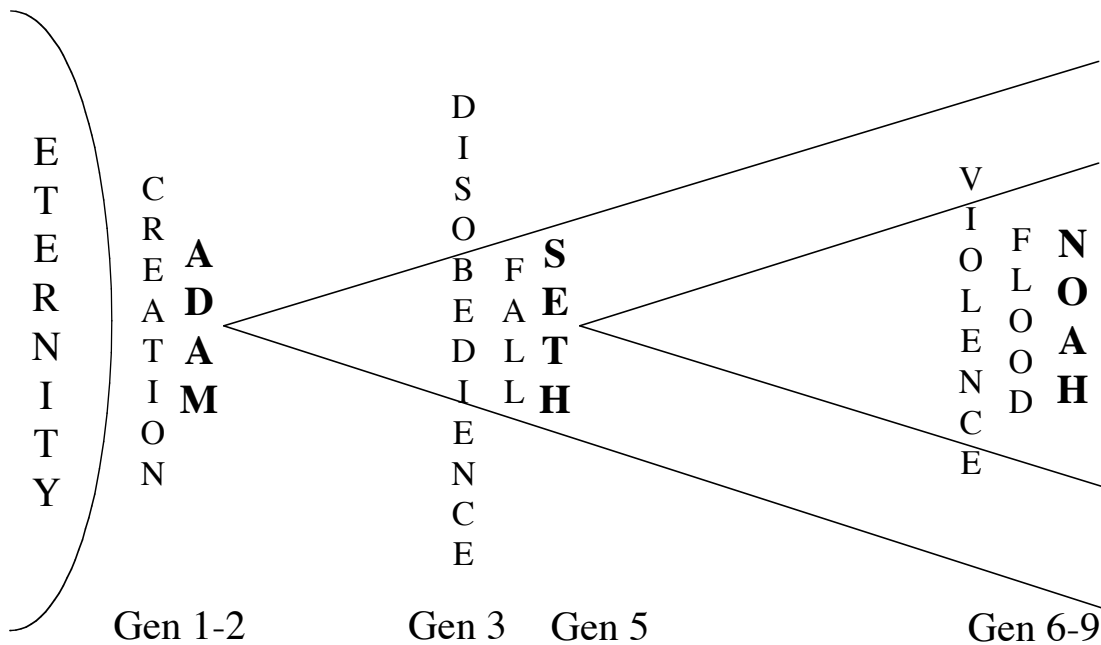
Because violence had been such a problem before the flood, it was necessary for God to provide special help to people so that they could control their inclinations toward violence and corruption. God explains this in 9:5 and 6 “...for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.” The most important word occurs three times in one verse. Verse 6 explains how accountability would work: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”

Mankind’s original opportunity to manage and rule over the earth failed because of disobedience, even though mankind dwelled in a perfect environment. Later the earth became corrupt and filled with violence even though people had the ability to distinguish between things that were good and things that were evil. For Noah and his descendents, God provided a system of accountability — a form of human self-government in which people would be responsible to each other for their behavior. This system of mutual accountability was intended to suppress the violence upon the earth.

The expectation of God for Noah and his descendents was very clear: If they increased in number and moved across the earth, and lived in obedience and faithfulness, and if they fulfilled their roles as stewards of the earth and made appropriate choices, and if they were accountable within society, then the spread of evil would be hindered and the purposes of God would be accomplished on earth.

This third repetition of the pattern in God’s activity on earth can be diagrammed as follows:

Overview of God’s Pattern of Dealing with Humanity



Another Crisis: The Good Benefits of God Are Used for Evil Purposes

This system seemed to work well for several generations, but all too soon again, people became careless about their obedience and the inclinations of their hearts were toward evil. The next crisis point is explained in Genesis chapter 11. Verse 1 informs us that “...the whole world had one language and a common speech.” Apparently up to this point in time, God wanted the human race to remain in some kind of cultural unity. Now think about that for a minute; what an incredible advantage this would be for humanity! There would be few problems of misunderstanding because people could understand each other very well. There wouldn’t be the ethno-centrism or the prejudices that arise because people speak and act differently than themselves.

Imagine what potential good could come out of a situation in which none of these misunderstandings would exist. Think about scientific development in the history of humanity. Probably one of the biggest barriers to development has been our inability to communicate. The best minds in one area of the world have not been able to compare their research with the smart people from another area. Because of their isolation and lack of easy communication people have never been able to pool their knowledge and advance our technology as would be possible if we had one language and came from one cultural background.

The Pattern of Human Behavior Is Revealed By the Improper Use of God-Given Abilities

God intended this unity in culture for the good of humanity, but whenever you have the potential for good in a situation like this, you also have the potential for indescribable evil to come from it. Chapter 11 describes people who were united in their desire to be disobedient to God. In verse 6, “The LORD said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this (to build a city and tower and make a name for themselves), then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them...’” And He confused their ability to communicate and cooperate in their work and therefore humanity was separated into many language groups. I suppose rather quickly the people began to identify others who spoke like themselves, then began to organize themselves into separate tribes and nations, and soon they scattered themselves over the face of the earth.

Was God’s Action a Matter of Judgment or Strategy? The Answer is “Both”

Many people would interpret God’s action as an act of judgment. Yes, it was judgment, but even more importantly, it was an act of amazing strategy. Why? Because the LORD decided to break up the population of the earth into small ethno-linguistic units. Because the people on earth, when they had one cultural identity, refused to be obedient to God and to follow Him, God decided to work with them as separate units, seeking to gain their obedience and loyalty one people group at a time. The confusion of languages was an important missionary strategy in God’s missionary plan for humanity.

Another Repetition of the Pattern

God did not change his pattern of activity even though there was a change in the strategy. God selected another individual to spearhead His future activities, just like He had done on previous occasions. God sovereignly called Abram out of the very area of idolatry and of disobedience where the tower of Babel was being built. Then God unilaterally assigned a responsibility for Abram which is spelled out in Genesis chapter 12, verses 2 and 3. The LORD said, “I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you; I will make your name great,” (the next line is a purpose statement) so that “you will be a blessing.” And then the LORD continued in verse 3, “I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who curse you,” (and another purpose statement) so that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Do you recognize the determination in God’s statements and plans? God’s said, “I will” five times!

Abram and His Descendents Were Blessed to Be a Blessing

Abram understood immediately that he was not selected for his own sake; nor was he to be blessed for his own sake. He was to be a channel of blessings for others. Abram, later Abraham, and his descendents were chosen for a specific reason — to be a light and a witness and a testimony to all the other, newly separated, people groups of the earth. The descendents of Abram were to have a missionary function. They were to be "a light to the gentiles". They were to be world changers, to the glory and honor of God.

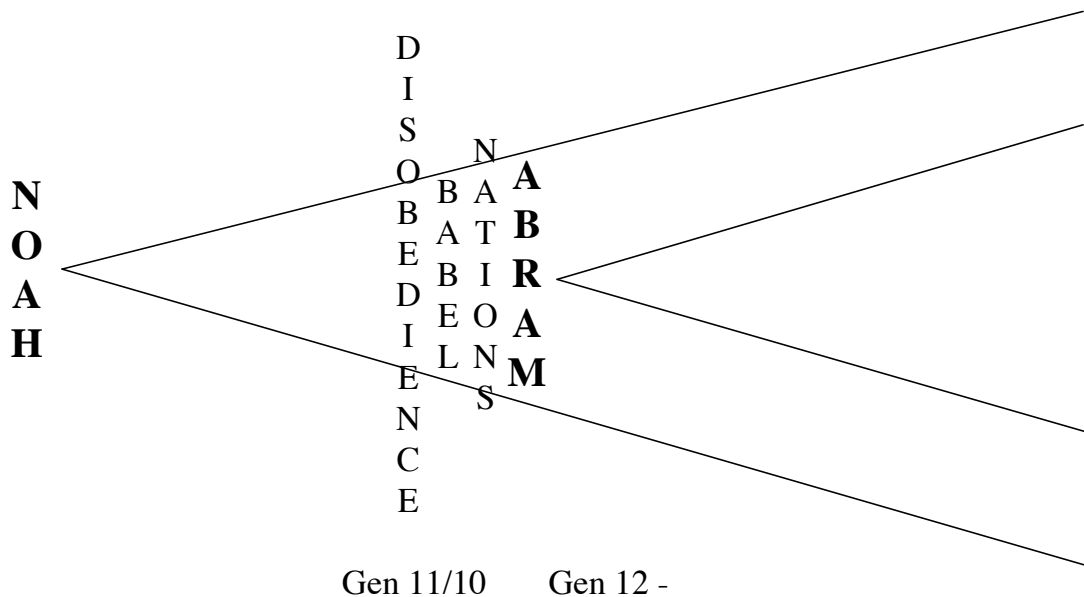
It was God’s plan to have a special relationship with one specific people group and through that special group to reach out to all the other ethnic groups on the planet. It was God’s intention to give His name to His special people. He promised to be their God and to govern them in a theocratic form of government. God said that He would dwell among them and bless them. In fact, they were to be so blessed that all the other people groups on earth would be drawn to them, and they would have opportunities to explain about the one true God.

Another Benefit is Given to Humanity

Like the other key people in this prologue section of Genesis, the descendents of Abraham were given their own special benefit to enable them to complete their responsibility. In addition to the authority of stewardship they inherited from Adam, the choices of conscience from Seth, the system of accountability given to Noah, the descendents of Abram received the blessings of the Law. The Law was to be their guide for righteous behavior — a comprehensive set of instructions to help everyone understand how to live in an intimate relationship with God and please Him in the midst of an evil world.

This step in the pattern can be added to the diagram:

God's Pattern of Dealing with Humanity - Continued



Carelessness and Disobedience is the Pattern of Humanity

Unfortunately, it seems that the descendents of Abraham, like everyone who had been ahead of them, became careless and inclined to go their own way. They thoroughly enjoyed being blessed by God, but they were not excited about passing on those blessings to others. Their behavior became so corrupt that at times they were accused of exceeding the gentiles in the practice of evil. Eventually, they rejected the ways of God and abandoned the responsibility which had been given to them. When the crisis became unacceptable, God set them aside. (There's some information about this in Romans chapters 9, 10 and 11; you can read it sometime.)

God Sends Another Key Leader Into the World

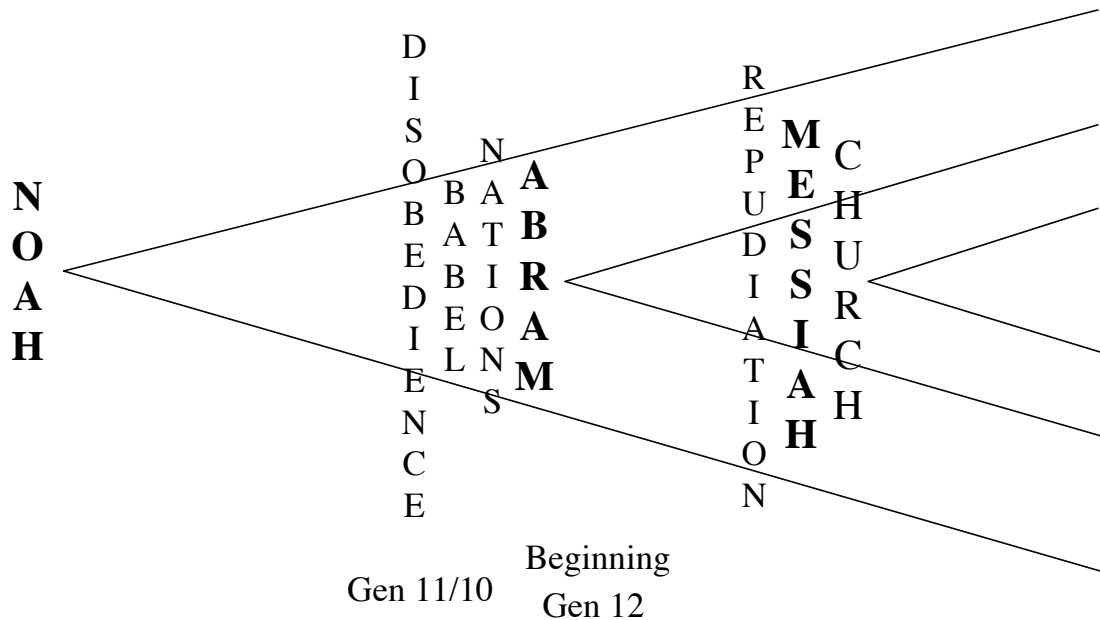
Once again God began a new movement with a key individual. This individual was Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Church in Galatia, Paul wrote that Christ came forth in the fulness of time. The Father sent His Son as a love gift to humanity. The Son came from heaven’s glories, lived upon the earth in a fleshly body for thirty-three years, died on a Roman cross, was buried, and rose from the dead on the third day. “God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The Lord Jesus Christ brought new life and salvation to the people of the earth. And that’s how we enter into the activities planned by God.

We, As the Followers of Jesus Christ, Are His Representatives On Earth

Jesus started another new movement in the purposes of God. We who are His followers are His spiritual descendents. Like the descendents of Seth, we have the privilege to “call on the name of the LORD” and the responsibility to “proclaim the name of the LORD.” Jesus Himself commanded His followers to “go and make disciples of all ethnic groups.” We are to be salt and light in the circumstances in which we live. As the spiritual descendents of Jesus Christ, we are co-participants with Him in bringing about God’s purposes here upon the earth.

The next section of our diagram:

God’s Pattern of Dealing with Humanity - Continued



God Has Given Us All the Provisions We Need To Fulfill Our Responsibilities

Each of the eras we have thought about in this chapter has had a special provision provided for those who aligned themselves with God. Adam had the ability to manage things. Seth and his descendents were expected to exercise value judgments about what was good and what was evil. God provided to Noah and his descendents a system of self government whereby people could be accountable in society. To Abram and his descendents God promised blessings and gave the Law so that the Gentiles would have a spiritual model to follow. And to the Church God has provided the most important and powerful gift of all: His indwelling and authoritative Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides and, most significantly, empowers us with God's own power so that we can do what He wants us to do. Jesus said, "all authority is given unto Me, the authority of heaven as well as earth" (Matthew 28:18-20) and He has directed the Holy Spirit toward His followers (John 14:16-17; Acts 2:33).

As the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is nothing to hold us back in our ability to carry out the task that God has assigned to us in our time era — to get on with the task of world evangelization. Like the descendents of Adam, Seth, Noah, and Abraham, we, as the descendents of our Lord Jesus Christ, represent God among the peoples of the earth. That raises the question, "Are we doing an adequate job?" Or, are we in danger of falling into habits that will make us unusable to God, similar to the people of God in previous generations?

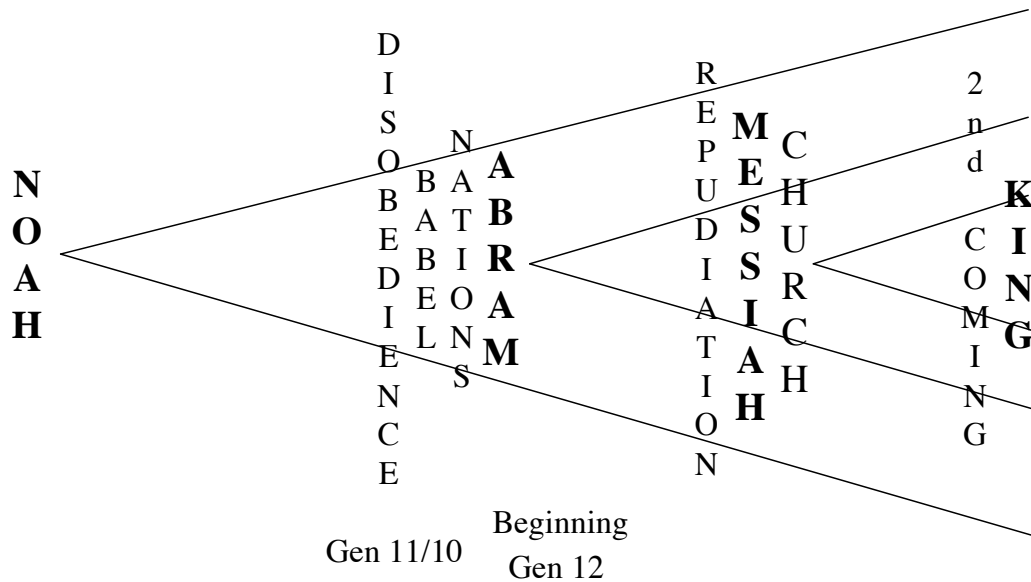
Some Concluding Thoughts About the Information In This Chapter:

God's purposes and activities have been consistent since creation. He designed and deputized people to help Him in the protection and care of all life on earth. The opportunity to work with God as co-participants in such activities should be considered a great privilege by every person, especially by those who seek to honor Him. Imagine, doing spiritual work in the name of our Heavenly Father!

At crisis times in human history, God instituted new procedures and provided unique benefits to enable His people to carry out their responsibilities. Unfortunately, the record of human history reveals that even the people of God eventually failed to maintain their loyalty and trust, obedient behavior, appropriate stewardship, and effective witness. However, God has sovereignly, faithfully, and persistently moved His creation toward the completion of the purposes which were determined in eternity past. There is no information in Scripture to indicate that there is another future strategy. We must remain faithful in our service as the people of God until our Lord Jesus returns as the King of Creation. The indwelling Holy Spirit is our helper.

The Final Picture of God’s Activity

God’s Pattern of Dealing with Humanity - Concluded



God Wants Us to Clearly Understand Our Responsibilities

Scripture explains to us the pattern of God’s activities so that we can understand how we must fit into His purposes and activities. There are a number of questions that we need to ask ourselves: Why has mankind consistently refused to cooperate with the Living God? Why do so many believers become lax or careless in their spiritual responsibilities? Will the same thing happen in our generation as happened in previous generations? If we claim to be the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, does God have our full cooperation? Will we as the followers of Jesus Christ evangelize among people groups who still do not know about Jesus Christ?

This Benediction Is a Suitable Conclusion to This Chapter:

“Now to Him who is able to establish you by (the) gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey Him — to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ.” Romans 16:25-27