

Introduction to the Bible: The Big Picture

I don't know why you have chosen to pick up this Bible, but I am happy that you did. Perhaps you are curious. Rest assured, there are a lot of curious things within these pages. Maybe you sensed that you should read it for some reason that is unexplainable to you. Or maybe you long for something beyond yourself and you know that something might be found within these pages - something to give comfort, peace, guidance. Maybe you know just which chapters and verses to turn to, but then again, reading the Bible can prove a daunting task too. I hope that this little pamphlet will help you make some sense of the Bible. Each of us has a story to tell. Most of us know where we come from - family, friends, geographical location. And we know those events that have shaped us into who we are today. Shakespeare said,

“All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...”

We are 'storied' people who play a part in this world for good or for ill. And just as we are living a story, we could ask, “Which one?” Do we live for ourselves? Do we live for our family? Are we indifferent, disillusioned, paralyzed? Do we live for God? What does that even mean: 'living for God'?

The Bible tells a story. Yes, it contains a collection of books that recount the lives of men, women, family, friends, murderers, lovers, and the circumstances that have shaped those characters, and undeniably, their world and ours. Although its authors do not seek to hide the real, and often raw, humanness of the Bible, it is not *merely* a human book. Jews and Christians have always believed that it is the book that tells the story of God's actions in our time and space - in this world that God has created. Because Christians believe that God exists, we believe in the

supernatural. This means that some of the more fantastic and seemingly ‘unbelievable’ things that the Bible regards as historical really did happen. Because these things defy our imaginations, comprehension, and the ‘laws of nature’, we regard them as supernatural. The God who created nature has been *both* above and beyond nature *and* intimately acting *within* nature to bring his plans for the world to their goal. But, what was that goal for all of creation?

The scriptures begin with *creation* and they end with *new creation*. Turn to Genesis 1 and 2 and read those chapters on creation. Perhaps read them aloud and listen to the beautiful poetic rhythm of Genesis 1.

What do we see in Genesis 1 and 2? Allow me to say at the outset that I don’t think the author of Genesis was concerned at all about the creation and evolution debate. This has been a hot issue that has divided ‘people of faith’ from the scientific community. It does not necessarily have to. These are matters of concern to us in our culture, but this would not have entered the author’s mind. Rather, we see that Genesis 1 and 2 want to give us a *theological* message: that God created this world for a purpose, and that humanity is the crowing achievement.

God made humanity in his *image and likeness* (Gen 1:26), which means a great deal. God graciously created us to share in bringing his world to a flourishing and fruitful state – one of order, peace, and rest. To be created in God’s image means that we are distinct from the rest of the created order: we can create, we can think, pray, self-reflect. All of this is true, but for in the biblical world, existence is more than biological or physical – having a heartbeat and brain function. In the biblical world, to exist also meant to have a *function* – a purpose. To be created in the image of God also meant that we were given the purpose – a vocation, really – of being mediators. That is, we stand between God and this world. We live, work, play, create, protect,

and steward the earth *as God himself would*. And we also offer the creation back to God in love, obedience, and service to him. Humanity is the bridge between God and the creation he placed us in. The language of Genesis *in light of the ancient cultures* from which the Bible comes to us tell us that God has always had big plans for the human race. He has invited us to work along side of him – to spread the boundaries of his presence in the world so that the earth and all its creatures might be filled with the glory, beauty, and love of God. *God calls us to a fully human and flourishing life in relationship with him and the rest of creation.*

God always desired for us to experience intimacy with himself and the rest of creation, but something went terribly wrong. Turn now to Genesis 3 and slowly read.

In Genesis 3, we are told that Adam’s sin (called, the Fall) fractured the intimate relationship that God established from the beginning. “Sin” is a word that suggests different things for each of us. Biblically speaking, sin is not merely a ‘bad thing’ that one does that God doesn’t like. No, sin has more to do with a deeply imbedded tendency to reject God, and pervert his good world that he gave into our care. And so we see this in the four relationships that God placed us in: Relationship with 1. Him, 2. Each other, 3. The creation, and 4. Ourselves.

Human sin fractured the relationships that God designed to live in intimate harmony with one another. Read Genesis 3:8-11 closely.

Notice what this text says first: Adam becomes *afraid* and *self-aware*. Before the Fall, humans did not fear God in this way. Adam hides. Furthermore, they possessed an orientation toward *other*: toward God, one another, and the world in a way that suggests that selfishness, introspection, and perversity did not exist. One Christian thinker has said that humanity became like a shaving of wood curled inward on itself. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were oriented

upward and *outward*, not inward on themselves. Humanity in a posture of love and service. But we know ourselves so well now, don't we? We know that it takes a certain death to our selves and a willful choosing to live for something greater than us. And we know what it is like to be painfully, and sometimes sickeningly aware of *self* - 'me.' And we live in a narcissistic culture that capitalizes on this sad reality. But God is calling us back to intimacy with him and with our neighbors.

Look again at 3:12-16. Do you notice how interpersonal human relationships were deeply wounded? God's words to Eve in verse 16 about her desire for her husband, but he ruling her, were not intended in the first creation. Look just ahead to Genesis 4. Notice how sin and brokenness is passed down to Adam's and Eve's descendents.

The third relationship that is broken is between humanity and the earth. Read Genesis 3:17-19. Notice how the ground is cursed? Read too Genesis 4:10-11 and compare this language. This frustrated relationship between Adam and the earth did not stop with him, but continues through the rest of humanity. Look closely at how the Apostle Paul reflects on this very reality in Romans 8:18-30.

Because we are image-bearers of God, humanity was given *stewardly dominion* over the earth. Remember, we were always to be God's representatives in creation. This dominion is *on behalf of/with God*. We live in a world that does not belong to us. And because we image God, we inherently *imitate* those creative things that God does: we classify the animal kingdom (Gen 2:19); we fashion tools from the creation (Gen 4:22); we plant gardens (Gen 9:22). We are all artists, creators - living representations of our creator God. *But despite all of humanity's giftedness we are in great need.*

The fourth, and final, most significant broken relationship we see in Genesis is between God and humanity. We have been banned – exiled – from God’s intimate presence. Reflect on the strong language of Genesis 3:24.

If we were created to be *in relationship* with God as something integral of what it means to be human, then a “Great Divorce” between God and ourselves (to use the title of C.S. Lewis’ powerfully imaginative work) has indeed occurred. In the place of intimacy, we experience alienation from God. But this grieved God. The ancient Christian thinker, Athanasius, said that God, the Artist, could not leave his work of art (humanity and the rest of creation) to ruin. He had to *restore* it. Restoration. Redemption. Salvation. These words all describe what God has been doing to set all things right again. And we are given a glimpse of God’s saving work in the midst of the pain, death, and alienation of the Fall. Did you notice Genesis 3:15 in your reading? Look there again. It sounds strange, I know. But this verse has historically been called *proto-euangelion*, or ‘the first gospel’ - the first announcement of the good news of salvation. Someone would come from the offspring of Eve to destroy the works of evil and sin, but would be wounded in the process.

We have been talking about the restoration of these broken relationships. To use a metaphor, it is as though we have been gazing at Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel *before* its restoration: cracks, chips, faded paint and all. We squint and ponder at Michelangelo’s original intent. But let’s focus on perhaps the most famous detail from “The Creation of Adam” that portrays the separation that formed between humanity and God. You likely know it well: it is the hand of Adam reaching for the hand of God. God is still reaching out: he always has been. And this is how we must conceive of the shape and direction of the Biblical story: ever since the Fall,

God has been acting within his creation to *restore* all that was broken and lost at the Fall. As you may know, the Sistine Chapel was fully restored. And those cracks have been filled in. But perhaps most noticeable are the colors that restore the beauty of what sadly became a faded memory of the original.

To restore this relationship between humanity and himself, God chose a particular people with whom to make a covenant, and to dwell in their midst. Sound familiar? It should, and it is meant to. Just as humanity dwelt in Eden with God, God chooses to dwell with a particular people *for the ultimate purpose of the restoration of all people and all of creation*. Notice the first step since Adam's Fall: God makes a covenant with Noah. This is significant, as in it, we see God restoring those lost relationships. Read Genesis 6-11 and note the language of what is called the *Noachic covenant*.

Did you notice how God not only makes a covenant with Noah, but with “every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth” (Gen 9:8)? And notice too that it is “an everlasting covenant” (9:16). God confirms the covenant that he made between humanity and the creation from the beginning. And this sets the stage for the rest of the Old Testament.

Enter Abraham and Israel. Read Genesis 12-18. Here we find how God makes a covenant with Abraham. But did you notice God's intentions? Was it to bless Abraham and Israel alone? Look again at Genesis 12:1-4: *all families* of the earth will be blessed in Abraham and his descendents. These are the beginning stages of God's plan to restore all of humanity with himself again.

But you may be wondering what a covenant is. When God enters into covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and ultimately you and me (more on this later), he is entering into relationship. As his people remain faithful to God, he remains faithful to them. However, we know from Israel's history that they strayed and did not remain faithful to God (more explicitly, God reveals himself as Yahweh to Israel). But, by his mercy and love, God always remained faithful to his people, even when they were unfaithful (read the moving book of Hosea and notice how God is calling Israel back to relationship with himself. Notice also his promises of restoration.).

God's covenant with Abraham to make a great nation out of him was *to bless all the nations of the earth through a unique, holy people*. But Israel experiences trials and tribulations throughout their history, but God redeems them from their adversity. And from that redemption, their *identity* is formed. You can read about this beginning with Joseph going down to Egypt and his brothers following him there in Genesis 37-50. Then, the book of Exodus, which is perhaps the most important book for Israelite identity, is about God bringing Israel out of slavery into the land of promise. And it is from this land that God's covenant promises to Abraham would be fulfilled and enacted *to bless the rest of the world*.

Later, in Deuteronomy, we see God's purposes for Israel:

⁶"For^(L) you are a people *holy* to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his *treasured possession*, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but^(M) it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping^(N) the oath that he swore to your fathers." (Deut 7:6-8).

The book of Deuteronomy is another of the more theologically significant books of the Old Testament (Genesis through Deuteronomy make up the first five books of the Bible known as the

“Pentateuch”). Deuteronomy, along with the other four books, serve as the foundation for the rest of the Old Testament. We encourage you to read all of them.

But as you do, always keep Eden in the back of your mind, because just as God dwelt in Eden, so too is he choosing to dwell in the midst of Israel. Sadly, as a result of the Fall, the relationship that was once intimate and seemingly uninhibited is now guided by certain regulations that Israel was to follow. This helps us understand the often long, and foreign books of Leviticus and Numbers. As you read those books, you will notice that God has a lot of specific requirements for his dwelling place, the Tabernacle, and for the cleanliness of his sacred dwelling space. You see, God is opening the door to Eden again, but in order to have access to God’s presence, sinful humans must be made pure – holy. These regulations continue even into the time of the Israelite Monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon (you can read about them in 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings). But as you read, pay careful attention to God’s plan for David and his descendants. Now read 2 Samuel 7, one of the most important chapters in this period. Here, God makes his covenant with David *and his descendents forever*. This is very important. Remember Genesis 3:15? We are edging ever closer to its ultimate fulfillment. And as you read the books of Samuel and Kings, you will notice that David is a *very human* character. We see all of his sins, and his graces.

God’s people throughout history have always had one thing in common: they are sinful. God’s people have not always been holy as they were called to be. We are all painfully aware of this. And with often-painful honesty, the Bible does not hide the sins and evils that *God’s own people* have committed in history. It seems to me that this lends some level of credence to the Bible’s message.

After the destruction of the Israelite monarchy under David and Solomon (you will see this downward spiral in 1 Kings), the kingdom is divided. And ultimately, the most painful experiences of Israel's history comes to pass: they are *exiled*. In 722 B.C. Assyria overtakes the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and then later in 586 B.C., the Babylonians overtake and carry away the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Once again, God's people are cast out of his presence. We are meant to see a connection here between Israel and Eden. Just as Adam was cast out of God's presence in Eden, so too Israel is taken away because of her sin. And, the dwelling place of God, the Temple, is no more. It is destroyed.

Enter the prophets of Israel. The prophets of old, much like the Bob Dylans of our time, constantly told Israel, "A hard rain's a gonna fall." The prophets played a role in Israel's life both before and after the exile. They judged Israel for their sin: when they did not represent God well and for the many times they broke relationship with him. And sinful Israel ignored and even killed the prophets. No one likes a prophet. Read the prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah to see how they warned Israel. And you will notice that the prophets didn't only preach "fire and brimstone." They also communicated God's faithful love for Israel, and they promised that one day God would not only restore Israel, but the rest of humankind and the created world, just as he promised to Abraham, and to Noah, and to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15.

God lamented the destruction of Israel, who is likened to a vineyard that God planted. Read the beautiful poetry of Isaiah 5. Isaiah is writing in the context of the Assyrian invasion that we mentioned above. But, there is hope. The hope is for a *restoration* again of Israel and the world. Read these are passages that speak of Israel's and the world's future hope: Isaiah 7:10-25;

11:1-16; 25:1-12; 27:1-13; 40:1-31; and 65:1-25. The other prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and the others speak similarly of God's judgment and restoration upon Israel and the world.

When will this future hope for the world come to reality? Enter Jesus Christ of Nazareth. By the time of the New Testament, some of the people of Israel have returned from Exile and have been in Palestine for the last 400 years. Jesus arrives on the scene in the midst of Roman occupancy of Judea and the Jewish hope is that the Messiah would come and set them free from Roman rule. They already experienced great pain due to the Greek occupancy under Alexander the Great and those that followed him. Now, in first century Palestine, the Jews are still anticipating the One who would come to fulfill all the hopes and dreams of Israel and the world – to fulfill those hopes that we read about earlier. They desired for God's Kingdom of come down to the earth.

Jesus fulfills those hopes for the world. He came and declared that he was the Messiah and that he was going to bring the ultimate Exodus from slavery. He came to set all people free from the bondage to sin and to set right those relationships that were broken that we saw in Genesis. He came to set us free – to cleanse us and purify us – so that we might live in relationship with God again. He came to heal our brokenness and the brokenness of the groaning world in which we live.

The Gospel of Luke records a defining moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry while teaching in synagogue. Notice that Jesus is reading some of the very portions we have read from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet:

¹⁶And [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (see Isaiah 61)

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

You see, Jesus came to set us free from our slavery to our sinful natures and to begin setting the creation free from its bondage to decay and futility (see again Romans 8:18-30). Read the Gospels, but perhaps start with the Gospel of Mark, and then move to John. As you read these along with Matthew and Luke, you will notice that they all share many things about Jesus, but each of them has their own distinct narrative flavor. Mark is a good place to begin, and although it is shorter, it is a very powerful look at the life of Jesus and his disciples. Mark does not hide the struggles, and pains, and the unbelief of Jesus' disciples, and he challenges us regularly to 'immediately follow' Jesus.

And as you read, remember the drama of Adam, Israel, and the world that we have talked and read about before this. Jesus enters that story to fulfill the hopes of Israel and the world. We would encourage you to read the book of Ephesians and then Romans. Here Paul outlines all of the implications for Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection. And in Romans 5 in particular, we see that Jesus is 'the *second* Adam.' Remember Adam's Fall in Eden that resulted in broken relationships between ourselves, God, each other, and the creation? Jesus came and began to set all of that right again.

We say Jesus *began* to set things right. Why? Well, the Bible makes clear that Jesus came and announced the Kingdom of God had come, but then after his death, resurrection, and

ascension, he commissions his Church on earth to *continue the work that he began to do*. That is why the Church is called Jesus' *body*. You can read about this in 1 Corinthians 12-15. When you get to chapter 15, you will see that this concerns Jesus' resurrection.

Why is the resurrection so important? Well, Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Jesus did not really physically rise from the dead, then the Christian faith is nothing. We might as well despair and throw in the towel. Jesus' resurrection is so important because in his death, he destroyed the power of death (remember, with Adam's Fall in Eden, death was introduced to the picture). But, he also raised himself to life again, but his resurrected body was something *other* – something different. It was physical and yet it was also spiritual in some new way. Why is this important? Well, anyone who is in Christ is a *new creation* (read 1 Corinthians 5). And the ultimate goal God has for our world is that everything would be made new again. Remember how the earth was subjected to decay and frustration? Well, creation will be set free too! And Jesus is what the Bible calls the 'firstfruits' of that new creation. God plans to restore and renovate this creation and do something that has not been done before, and Jesus' body is one that is suitable for this new reality that is fully yet to come.

What is this reality, and when will this happen? Well, you read the hopes of this new creation earlier in passages in Isaiah. These are also echoed in the book of Revelation in chapters 21 and 22. Read these chapters, for they are the beautiful picture of what God intends to do with his world. He intends to restore, to heal, to mend, and to have all relationships reconciled once again.

But, why did Jesus establish his Church, and what is the purpose of the Church on earth? Remember how God began to set right the curse of the Fall by choosing Israel to be the bringers of

his blessing to the earth? Well, it is the same with the Church. The Church is not the bricks or wood of buildings. The Church is not any one denomination. The Church is made up of all people at all times and in places who have ever believed and will ever believe and live in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Church is God's visible Kingdom on the earth. But, as we all know too well, the church (like Israel) is not perfect. We also groan like the creation as we await the final redemption of our own bodies, for we are sinful and struggle with pride, selfishness, envy, perversions, and the like. We are fallen humans who are on a journey with God. We journey with him and in the power of his Spirit strive to be his presence in this broken world. The Church exists to bring salvation to the world - to bind up the broken-hearted, to set captives free, to heal wounds, and to love God and all people. The Church lives to *embody* Christ in the earth. The Church exists to live Jesus' life in the world until he comes again. And so, the Church waits in anticipation for the day when all things will be right again. In the meantime, we work, we pray, we live in community with each other, and we grow more and more like Jesus. That is why we live. To see how the earliest Christians lived in relationship with God, with each other, and the world around them, read the book of Acts. Acts is a powerful book that records the 'acts' of the Apostles. But really, they are God's acts in history through his people.

And so you and I stand at a crossroads in our place in history. Each day, each moment, we are faced with the question, "Whose story am I living? On whose stage am I playing a part? What am I living *for*?" We can either live for our own selves, or we can live in relationship with God through Jesus and play a part in his divine drama for the redemption of the world. That's the story of the Bible in the grand scheme of things. And if we are going to be a part of it, we have to ask God to help us. We can't do his work alone. That is another lesson from Jesus' death on the

cross: the cross is the symbol of our own inability to save ourselves, and ultimately our world. In humility, God came to us (see Philippians 2) in the human person, Jesus, and lived the life that we can't live, and he now lives in us and is working in us in our world. And if we are going to live in relationship with God and live out his purposes in the world, we have to live in community with his people. There are local gatherings of the Church in this very neighborhood. We invite you to be a part of God's plan for the world. We long for you to know God and be known by him, and to find the healing, and wholeness, and new identity that only Jesus Christ can give.