

## Reading the World's Greatest Story

The heart and soul of the Bible is its story. It is the real saga of a particular people, how God called them and intended for them to bring blessing to all people.

*Story* is also the word that best describes our own lives. While we may or may not follow the right rules, investigate certain facts and attempt to live wisely, none of these activities provides the central way we make sense of our lives. Stories give context and provide meaning.

All the different parts of the Bible come together as one narrative.

**To understand the Bible you must get to know its characters, understand its setting and follow its plot.**

The climax and ultimate resolution will make sense only if you've followed the earlier parts as a story. Learn to feel the tension and wrestle with its major conflict. Lose yourself in the story the way you do with a good novel.

We present here an abbreviated version of the story of the Bible as a drama in five acts.<sup>1</sup>

### Act I: Creation

The drama begins with God already on the stage. He is creating the world. He makes a man, Adam, and places him in the Garden of Eden to work in it and take care of it. God's intention is for humanity to be in close relationship with him and in harmony with the rest of creation around them. God is described in these early chapters of the Bible as dwelling in the garden together with the first human beings, Adam and Eve. God gives this assessment of his work:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31).

Later, God's people celebrated God's creative work:

“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you” (Nehemiah 9:5-6).

Act I reveals God's desire for people and provides the setting for all the action that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Holy Bible, Today's New International Version TNIV, International Bible Society 2001, 2005

## **Act II: The Fall**

Tension is introduced in the story when Adam and Eve decide to go their own way and seek their own wisdom. They listen to the deceptive voice of God's enemy, Satan, and doubt God's trustworthiness.

As a result of this rebellion:

The Lord God banished him [Adam] from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:23-24).

God's intention in creation is known, but part of his own creation has put his plan off course. Can God regain his relationship with humanity and remove the curse from creation? Or did God's enemy effectively end the plan and subvert the story?

Acts I and II take only the first few pages in the Bible to be completed. Yet they introduce the struggle that dominates the rest of the story.

## **Act III: Israel**

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3)

In calling Abram (God later renamed him Abraham) and promising to make him into a great nation, God is narrowing his focus and concentrating on one group of people for a period of time. But the ultimate goal remains the same: to bless all the people on earth, remove the curse from creation and restore the original relationship that existed in the garden.

When Abraham's descendants are later enslaved in Egypt, a central pattern in the story is set: God returns to his people, frees them and restores them to the land promised to them. God makes a covenant with this new nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. He appoints Moses to be their leader during their liberation from Egypt—the Exodus. As part of the covenant, God makes it clear that if his people remain true to him and faithfully follow his ways, he will bless them in their new land and make it like the original Garden of Eden.

However, if Israel is not faithful to the covenant, God warns them that he will send them out of the land, just as he did with Adam and Eve. Sadly, and in spite of God's repeated warnings and pleadings, they are determined to go their own way. They break the covenant, follow the false gods of the nations that surround them and bring the judgment of God down on themselves.

Abraham's descendents, chosen to reverse the failure of Adam, have now apparently failed themselves. Along the way, however, God has planted the seeds of a different outcome. One of Israel's kings, David, is noted for being a man after God's own heart. So God promises to send another king to Israel, a son of David, who will lead Israel wisely, bring the nation back to God and be the agent of blessing to the people of the world.

So while Act III ends tragically, with God apparently absent, the hope of a promise remains.

## **Act IV: Jesus**

Four centuries later, the people of Israel are suffering under Roman occupation and waiting for God to return. An angel of God comes to a young woman named Mary and announces,

"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-33).

Jesus' arrival is introduced with the claim that God is keeping his promise.

So Jesus begins his mission. He heals sickness and disease among the people. He confronts God's enemies in the spiritual realm, the demons, and forcefully orders them to leave the people they torment. Jesus forgives the sins of those who humbly come to him. He proclaims the gospel, or good news, that:

"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)

The very heart of Jesus' message is the good news of the coming of God's reign. God is coming back to dwell with his people. This is why Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

But Jesus' message receives mixed responses. Some people believe, and out of these Jesus chooses twelve disciples or followers. But most people simply watch him with amazement, never knowing quite what to make of him. The established religious leaders quickly become hostile toward him. Eventually this conflict escalates to the

breaking point and the religious leaders conspire to have Jesus arrested and killed on a cross.

But this defeat is actually God's greatest victory. Jesus' death turns the tables on God's enemy and turns the world upside down. By willingly giving up his life as a sacrifice, Jesus takes onto himself God's judgment for our wrongdoing. As the early Christian leader Paul later wrote:

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:13-15).

Jesus speaks the message of God as Israel's true prophet. He defeats the very power behind all evil as Israel's true king, the son of David. He gives up his own life as a sacrifice for his people as Israel's true priest. He leads his people to a new Exodus, through death to a new life. In all of this Jesus shows himself to be the promised child of Abraham who reconciles humanity with God. It is through Jesus that Israel can finally fulfill its role, the purpose for which God called Abraham.

This account of Jesus is the focal point of the Bible's entire story. The key struggle with God's enemy, the desperate attempts to correct what has gone wrong at the very heart of things, comes to a head in the life of Jesus. He is the one and only hero of the story.

## **Act IV: The New People of God**

If the key victory has already been secured, why is there an Act V? God wants the victory of Jesus to spread to all the nations of the world. Those who follow Jesus are being built into God's new temple, the place where God's Spirit lives. God is gathering these people from all around the world and forming them into his church. When this is complete, Jesus will return and the reign of God will become a reality throughout God's creation (1 Corinthians 15:24-25). The curse imposed during Act II will be removed (Revelation 22:3).

The task of bringing blessing to the people of the world has again been given to the descendants of Abraham. All those who belong to Christ are true children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). Act V emphasizes the mission of Christ-followers: to proclaim and live out the liberating message of the good news of Christ's kingdom.

Act V moves through history to our own time, enveloping us in its drama. The message of Christ and his kingdom has now come to us. The challenge of a decision now confronts us too. What will we do? How will we fit into this story?

The story of the Bible is the true account of the central conflict winding its way through the history of the world. Will we be a part of God's mission of re-creation—of restoring the world around us—and making the world (including ourselves) new?

### **What Now?**

The most important thing you can do is to read these Scriptures carefully. God's Spirit uses them actively and powerfully to accomplish his purposes—in you and through you to have an impact on the world.

The Bible is not necessarily an easy book to read. Some passages are difficult for everyone to understand. But if you stick with it, if you are committed to learning more about God and the story he's given us in the Bible, it will guide you, change you and keep you close to God.

## Finding Your Place in the Story

The story of Jesus offers a new beginning for humanity and confronts each of us with a personal choice. If you haven't begun to follow the way that Jesus provided for restoring your relationship with God, this section will help you to understand what this means. If you are following Jesus, these ideas are valuable in helping you realize what you have been given through Christ.

Soon after Christ had given his mission to his followers and returned to heaven Peter (who was a disciple of Jesus and a leader in the early church) was speaking to a gathering of Jews. He recounts the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, then challenges them to make the right response to what God has done for them:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets....

“Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:19-26).

Peter connects Jesus' sacrifice to the ancient promise made to Abraham. He makes clear that now is the time for the blessing to occur. God has made a way for you to turn away from your wrongdoing and return to him.

As a son or daughter of Adam, you were born separated from God and the close, trusting relationship he desires to have with you. Jesus is the one who can bring you back to God. Your sins can be forgiven and your life can be renewed when you personally accept Christ's sacrifice on your behalf. As John's account of the story of Jesus puts it:

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Your life's story can be rewritten within the storyline of the Bible. You can join with God's people from all over the world who are living out Act V today. For this to happen, though, you must turn away from your sins and commit to trust and follow Jesus.

## Getting Started

Perhaps you don't know where to start reading in this book. Although this is not an exhaustive list, the following passages will give you a helpful overview of God's story.

### Act I: Creation

The creation, Genesis 1—2:3  
Praise God for his creation, Psalm 8  
Praise to the Creator of all things, Psalm 104  
Praise God for creating me, Psalm 139

### Act II: The Fall

The fall into sin, Genesis 3  
Noah, the flood and the ark, Genesis 6—9:17  
A prayer of repentance, Psalm 51  
No one is righteous, Romans 3:9–26

### Act III: Israel

God's covenant with Abraham, Genesis 12:1–9; 15:1–21  
Abraham almost sacrifices his son Isaac, Genesis 22:1–19  
Jacob receives his father's blessing, Genesis 27:1–40  
Jacob's (Israel's) family, Genesis 29:16–30:24  
Joseph the dreamer, Genesis 37:2–36; 39—50  
Moses is born in Egypt, Exodus 1—2:10  
Ten plagues, Exodus 7:14—11:10  
The Passover, Exodus 12:1–17  
The Israelites leave Egypt, Exodus 12:17—15:21  
God's covenant with Israel, Exodus 19—20; 24  
Rahab the prostitute hides the Israelite spies, Joshua 2  
God keeps his promise, Joshua 23—24  
David kills Goliath, 1 Samuel 17  
David becomes king, 2 Samuel 5:1–5  
God's promise to David, 2 Samuel 7  
David and Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11—12:25  
The Lord is my shepherd, Psalm 23  
A prayer of thanksgiving, Psalm 100  
Israel sent into exile, 2 Chronicles 36:15–23  
Queen Esther saves her people, Esther  
Messiah's birth prophesied, Isaiah 9:1–7  
God's promise to return, Isaiah 52:1–12  
Daniel's dream of God's kingdom, Daniel 7

### Act IV: Jesus

The birth of Jesus, Luke 1—2

The temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13  
The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5—6  
Jesus shares his calling with the people, Luke 4:16–30  
Jesus' teaching on prayer, Luke 11:1–13  
The lost son, Luke 15  
New birth, John 3  
Jesus is the resurrection and the life, John 11  
Three prayers of Jesus, John 17  
The Lord's Supper, Luke 22:7–38; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34  
The death of Jesus, Luke 23:26–56; John 19:16–42  
The resurrection of Jesus, Luke 24; John 20  
Jesus ascends into heaven, Acts 1:1–11

### **Act V: The New People of God**

The Great Commission from Jesus, Matthew 28:16–20  
The coming of the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:1–21  
“Repent and be baptized,” Acts 2:22–47  
Jesus, the fulfillment of Abraham's covenant, Acts 3  
Salvation in Jesus alone, Acts 4  
Paul's conversion, Acts 9:1–31  
Paul's testimony before King Agrippa, Acts 25:23—26:32  
What real love is, 1 Corinthians 13  
The fruit of the Holy Spirit, Galatians 5:22–23  
The armor of God, Ephesians 6:10–18  
Imitating Christ, Philippians 2:1–11  
Heroes of the faith, Hebrews 11  
Faith in action, James 2:14–26  
The return of Christ, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Peter 3:3–14  
The new heaven and earth, Revelation 21—22