

## The Power of a Story



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*Lord, thanks for the privilege that we have to enjoy Your Word that You've revealed to us. Thank You for the gift it is to us. Thank You that we don't have to try to imagine who You are or what You are like, but that we can read and see and understand from what You've already shown us in Scripture. So I pray that our hearts would be open to the work of Your Spirit, that our minds would be open to think and consider, and that in all these things we would be humble before You. And we pray it in Your Son's name. Amen.*

I don't know what level of familiarity you have with Scripture. Some of you may be longtime students of Scripture having dived deeply into books or passages. Some of you may read the Bible in the original languages. I don't know where all of you are. The purpose of this study is a little different perhaps than what you've experienced before. Rather than looking at and going into one book of the Bible or even just one passage of the Bible, the purpose of this study is to ask the question, "What's the whole thing about?" To look at the Bible as a whole. This is an important, I think, endeavor; because when we read the parts of Scripture if we don't have a sense of the whole, it's more difficult for us to make sense of the parts.

So this study was really spawned by an experience I had on an airplane. I was coming out of the Middle East and connecting through Paris to come back to the US. And I'm sure some of you have flown through Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris—great place to have an espresso, terrible place to catch a flight. So of course the flight out of the Beirut was late, and I was late to arrive in Paris. And because this had been an emergency trip, I hadn't had an opportunity to even confirm a seat on the return flight from Paris to the US, so I had no assigned seat. Eventually I got to the gate after getting lost in the airport at least twice. And I think it would be fair to say that I was maybe not walking in the Spirit by that point. Maybe anxious, yes. Angry, yes. All those things.

I got to the gate of the international flight. And there was no one there except a person working at the little desk, the little counter there at the gate. Thankfully, when I walked up, she said, “Are you Mr. Young?” I thought that’s a good sign, right? And I said, “Yes, I am.” And she said, “We don’t have a seat for you on today’s flight in coach, but we do have a seat for you in business class.” Well, I’m a missionary. I don’t do business class. I had walked through business class, trying not to violate the tenth commandment as I walked through, but there I was in business class. So because I wasn’t walking closely with the Lord at that point and struggling with my attitude, I thought to myself, *What could I do that would make it such that no one would talk to me for the next eight hours? I just want to sink into this luxury that has been given to me by the grace of God and just sit here and soak it all in, in all my glorious selfishness.*

So as I thought about what I could do so that no one would talk to me for the next eight hours, I decided that I would take my Bible and open it on my lap assuming that no one in their right mind would want to talk to someone with an open Bible on their lap, right? Who wants to get preached to for the next eight hours? So we took off and the fellow to my right—a younger, well-dressed fellow, probably a young businessman—leaned over (French accent, spoke English) and pointed at my Bible on my lap and said, “What’s that book about?”

It was an interesting question. A startling question. And the truth is by this point I already had two degrees from theological seminaries. I could read the text in Greek or Hebrew. I could analyze it down to the finest accent marks on the letters of either of those languages. I could dive deeply into those passages that some people would consider difficult. But when he asked me the question, “What’s that book about?” meaning the whole Bible, I blanched. I didn’t know what to say. What could you say that would encompass the whole of Scripture, but yet not be a four-hour dissertation on the sovereignty of God and everything from there to the end?

So I ask you that question. What would you say if someone with very little knowledge of Scripture asked you that question about the Bible: “What’s that book about?” Could you give them an answer? Or let’s say that you’re teaching a third-grade Sunday school class and one of your students who perhaps hasn’t been raised in the church said, “What’s that book about?” Or perhaps a colleague at work who has a mild acquaintance with Christianity

in the past but never has studied the Bible, and they ask you, “Well, what’s the Bible about?” Could you answer that question? Would you answer that question?

So that encounter led me then to begin to formulate an understanding of the Bible as a whole. And so really this study is about that question: “What’s that book about?” Now, it seems to me, as I reflected on my own reading of Scripture and on my hearing of other people teach Scripture, that I hear two different understandings of what the Bible is as I encounter those teachings. On the one hand, I hear people talk about the Bible as a collection of ideas about God. We read the Bible and we see that God is powerful or God is all-wise or that God is a loving. And frankly, sometimes in my own devotional life when I’m reading passages of the Bible what I want to see most is what’s revealed about God there. And so truly the Bible does give us lots of truth about who God is and what He’s about in the world.

On the other hand, I see people also reading the Bible as kind of a handbook for happy living, a collection of wise tips about how to be married, how to raise your kids, how to manage your money, how to lead an organization. And so we often read the Bible asking for guidance, don’t we? “Lord, what should I do?” Or when we’re facing a difficulty or struggle: “How do I navigate this challenge?” And indeed the Bible does give us some clear ideas about how to lead a life that is not only pleasing to God but ultimately pleasing to ourselves as well.

But I think there’s a bigger answer to the question of what the Bible actually is than just a series of collected ideas about God or tips for how to have a successful life. I think where we need to start is to see the Bible as a story with a beginning and with an end that has an arc of narrative or a story that flows through its pages, not just randomly put together. Even though it was written over several hundred years by many different authors, the Bible has an amazing cohesiveness. In fact, the very first phrase in the Bible, “In the beginning,” right? “In the beginning, God,” that Hebrew phrase uses a word for beginning which implies a set period of time. So the very first words of the Bible imply that there is an already foreseen end: that the Bible’s going to start somewhere and finish somewhere. So it begins with this idea that it is cohesive and it is a whole and should be read as a whole, as a story. And so we would argue that the Bible in and of itself gives us the privilege of creating a sense of a story by which we understand who God is and by which we live.

But the Bible doesn't stop there. The Bible makes the audacious claim to be *the* story—the one true story about the one true God. There was a British missionary and theologian by the name of Lesslie Newbigin. And he says this about the Bible: “The Bible is universal history. It sets forth a story of the whole world from its beginning to its end. It is the true story of the world. And all other stories are at best partial narratives, which must be understood within the context of the biblical story.” Now, when you make the claim or when the Bible makes the claim that it is *the* story in a world full of other stories, that's an audacious claim, isn't it? And the reality is, when the Bible was composed, both in the ancient Near East and in first-century, Greco-Roman society, the world already was full of other stories. The world of the Bible of the biblical authors was just as pluralistic as the world that you and I live in. So when we hear the claim that the Bible tells the one story, the one true story of all of human history and human destiny—and we think of that as not only audacious but even offensive in a pluralistic context—it is no more audacious or offensive today than it was when it was written and that same claim was made.

When we talk about this idea of a story, we're talking about those questions that people often intuitively answer but may not explicitly talk about: “Is there a God? If so, what is He like? Where did I come from? Who am I in the midst of all that's happening around me? Is life random? Is history itself moving towards some type of a conclusion?” Or is it (if you're in a Hindu story), is it a cyclical type of history? Most of us fell asleep when we took philosophy in college. Philosophy makes my head hurt to be quite frank. Some of the ways that language is used and the questions that are asked always seem a little futile to me. Just get me on to those business classes where I can learn how to make a living, right? But the truth is the questions that are considered by the world's great philosophies all create a sense of who we are and what kind of a world we live in and is there a God? That's a part of that. Well, the Bible makes a very clear statement: This is the one true God. He oversees all of human history from the very beginning to the very end. And whatever other stories they may be at best are only partial narratives that must be understood within the framework of the biblical story. As I said, that's audacious and even offensive in a pluralistic world.

So if we're going to say, “What's that book about?” Clearly, we could say, “Well, it's a book about God.” We could start there, couldn't we? It certainly says a lot about God. As we noted earlier, we begin to understand His character. We begin to understand the

way He works in the world. But the truth is the Bible actually talks more about humanity than it talks about God. The Bible is a story, not just of religious ideas, it's a story of history, with characters, both good and bad, that come in and out of its pages. Some of the stories about people in the Bible make us cringe. Some of them make us laugh. It's a very human story, isn't it, where people push the narrative forward. So I think it's fair to say, if someone asks you, "What's that book about?" you could say, "It's about God's engagement, the way God's involved in all of human history and ultimately in human destiny, meaning from the beginning to the end of time, as the Scripture describes it."

There are several other things we could say in this particular instance. We could say, for example, that the Bible narrates to us God's desire and His intent to be known from the very beginning to the end. It's clear that God desires to be known by those whom He has created. And He desires to be worshiped by them. This desire of God is not because He needs humanity to worship Him. God is presented as one who lacks nothing. It's driven by His knowledge that if humans know Him and worship Him, they will find life and satisfaction in Him that they can find nowhere else. So it's driven by His—here's a big theological word for you—His beneficence. I tell the students we have to use four-syllable words occasionally just to justify the price of tuition at the seminary. His beneficence is His desire for our good. And so God makes Himself known and gives us the opportunity to worship Him for our benefit, because He knows that in Him we will find life and satisfaction that we can find nowhere else but in Him.

What else do we see? Well, the Bible narrates the story of how God oversees and directs human history. We see God using both those whom He directly speaks to, and even kings of empires that do not worship Him, for His purpose. We see God even allowing His Son to be murdered by the Romans, went through all of that narrative. It's clear that everything that's happening is what God has willed to happen, not what the Romans have willed. Well, we see God accomplishing His purpose through a hardhearted Pharaoh, through a pagan king in Persia, through, as I said, the Roman government as they both crucify Jesus and then give Paul free passage to Rome where he can complete and continue his mission.

It also narrates to us how God engages Himself—here's another big word—redemptively. How God enters into human history with a clear purpose or, I'm going to say, a clear mission to rescue

humanity from their plight and restore them to the way He had created them to live. And so if someone were to ask me again, “What’s that book about?” recognizing that one of the words here would require a lot of explanation, I would probably say, “It’s a book about God’s redemptive mission, God’s desire to redeem. And everything God does to accomplish that desire.”

Now on the third week, we’ll spend a lot of time talking about redemption and what that means. In fact, we’ll talk a little bit more about it today. So we’ll leave that theological phrase out there for you right now, but it’s about God having a particular purpose so that His desire to be known and worshiped can be realized. Everything that God does in Scripture, everything that God does, is so that He may be known and worshiped. And the core of the Bible, what happens from Genesis 3 all the way to the end is all that God does to redeem humanity from the penalty of sin that they incur because of the fall, which we’ll talk about a little bit longer.

So then the question comes up, “How does this story unfold?” If we’re saying it’s the story of God’s redemptive mission, how could we put it together into some type of scheme that we could hold onto, maybe even draw out on a napkin or remember as we encounter these individual stories that raise some of these harder questions. So there’s been a fairly standard approach to this question, usually around four major ideas related to the story of the Bible. The first, of course, is everything begins with the creation narrative. And we’ll talk next week about how central it is through all of Scripture that God is known as the Creator. As we said earlier, “In the beginning, God created,” cannot be ignored. It’s a bold opening sentence. It doesn’t give you time to kind of warm up to what God’s going to say. Just kind of, boom, in your face: “In the beginning, God created.” Start here. And so we’ll look at and talk about, for example, who is it that God creates? What’s characteristic of the whole creation? What we can say here simply is that God as Creator is deemed to be the ruler over all creation. God is presented as the source of life. I think somebody mentioned the “Book of Life” throughout Scripture. And all of creation is deemed to be what in those early chapters of Genesis? And God created this, and He said, “It’s good.” And then we’ll talk particularly about this idea of humanity created as the image of God. What does that mean? And how has that worked out in life?

I think what we want to say is that in this creation story God is present with creation in a way that is unencumbered. They freely

engage and interact with one another. Creation, we learn from Psalm 19, sings God's praises. That is, it reveals a part of God. The first humans interact with God in an intimate way in those early chapters, as He gives them a sense of their mission to tend the garden and to enjoy it, as He allows them to experience coming together as man and woman. They lack nothing. That's the key. When God creates, Adam and Eve lack nothing. The creation lacks nothing. There is no sense of deprivation. There is no sense of need that is not met. What is amazing is that when we come to Revelation 21, the last book of the Bible, the last chapters of the Bible (Revelation 21:1–22:5), we see a similar description. In Revelation 21, God creates the new heavens and the new earth. And in verse 4, He says, "Behold, I make all things new." And so in that new heaven and that new earth, humanity lives in perfect harmony with God. For those who have confessed faith in Him, we read there are no tears. There's no need; there's no lack. Metaphorically, the presence of Christ is the light by which humanity lives. There's no sun and no moon in the vision of John. The tree . . . I should say the river of life flows, and those around it bear fruit; and people from all tribes and tongues and nations come and worship and pay tribute to the one true God. So you have a similar discussion in Genesis 1 and 2 to Revelation 21:1–22:5.

So the question is, "Why did God have to make new heavens and a new earth to recreate what He had created in the garden of Eden?" And so the Bible then tells us the answer to that question is because of human sin or human rebellion. So it's a story of creation and, ultimately, a story of recreation, or we could use the word *consummation*. The recreation or the consummation has to be completed because humanity chooses to rebel against the one who has given them everything they could possibly imagine they could need. Every need met, every part of life satisfied, and yet they choose to rebel against Him. And we'll look carefully at that story in Genesis 3 and see exactly what it is that they seek and how it is that they choose to rebel. And when they rebel, they bring upon themselves the judgment of their Creator. In 2:17, when He told them about the knowledge of the tree of good and evil, he tells them, "If you eat of it, you will surely die." And so if you're reading the story of human rebellion and you've never read it before, when Eve takes that fruit and eats it and then gives it to Adam and Adam eats it, the real question is, What's God going to do? He's told them they will die. So what will God do in the face of dramatic rebellion against Him? A disavowal that what He had created was in fact good? The searching for something better

than what God had created? The story is dramatic. It's powerful. And God's response to Adam and Eve when they rebel is shocking.

So because of depravity, because of rebellion, because of the curse falling on humanity and the creation itself, God has to do something to restore creation and restore humanity to the way He had originally created. And that's what we mean by redemption. So the bridge between the fallen creation and the new heavens and the new earth is God's redemptive act, the way God rescues and restores. So we're going to spend a lot of time in Genesis 3, because the pattern whereby God responds to Adam and Eve's sin sets the pattern for how God will respond to human rebellion throughout all of Scripture. The word that describes God's response to human rebellion to accomplish His desire to be known and worshiped by all is the theological term, the biblical word *redemption*.

So let's talk just briefly about redemption. We'll go into it in a lot greater detail. We're going to say that the act of redemption is a part of what's known as the mission of God. So what we have on the screen is a Latin phrase, *Missio Dei*. You can make it out into English. *Dei* or *Deo* is God. *Dei* is a genitive form of God. *Missio* sounds like mission, right? And so the mission of God implies that God pursues an end that He desires. So if a military commander says to his troops, "Troops, our mission is to take that ridge. Men, our mission is to take that ridge." Then there's a clearly defined end. And so everything they do is to accomplish that end. And so we're going to argue that God's mission is to redeem. And to redeem means to rescue and to restore. God's mission to redeem creation and redeem humanity is to rescue them from the curse of their rebellion, the penalty of their rebellion, and restore them to fellowship or life with Him.

So you may have heard that the three Rs are reading, writing, and arithmetic. But the three Rs are for us: redemption means to rescue and restore. And we'll see that you can throw another R in that list, because alongside of rescue and restore, the Bible also gives us the language of ransom. The redemption is accomplished through the payment of a price that's known as a ransom, particularly as we read about that in Christ. So God's redemptive mission is everything He must do to rescue and restore humanity to full life and fellowship with Him, and, in fact, all of creation.

One of the authors I find very insightful in writing about the whole of Scripture is a man by the name of Christopher J.H. Wright. And he comes out and says, "Mission is what the Bible is all about. It's

the story of God's mission to redeem God's creation and restore it to what He had intended." So God's desire is to be known and worshiped by all. In order for that desire to be realized, God accomplishes His mission of redemption. And so when we get to the consummation, then everything that God has purposed, everything that's a part of His mission, will be fulfilled.

So there's the full scope of Scripture, but there's one other piece that I want to introduce to you here in these last few minutes. One that I think is often overlooked. And that is, other than this, alongside of these four great acts of God is another part of what God does to accomplish His mission. And that is, He establishes a people unto Himself, and we're going to call them the people of God's mission. God creates for Himself a people through whom He will accomplish His mission. It's interesting, isn't it? If you think back to the creation narrative, God creates humanity in His image and He gives them a mission to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and to rule over it. And Scripture never tells us why God delegates His rule over creation to people. The same is true when God establishes, when God creates a special people unto Himself, and delegates the execution of His mission through His sovereign empowerment and rule to His people. In the Old Testament, God's people, of course, are called Israel, the nation of Israel. First, they are the descendants of Abraham and then they become the nation of Israel. And in the New Testament, God's people are described as the church.

So the question comes up—we'll finish up with this—how will God accomplish His redemptive mission through His people? And we're going to argue that the Bible presents to us two ways. The first, that ultimately redemption is accomplished by the eternal Son of God and His death on the cross. He is a descendant of Abraham through the line of David. And so through God's people, a redeemer comes, the Redeemer, the one who accomplishes all that's necessary for God to redeem. We'll spend a lot of time talking about this centrality of Jesus in God's redemptive mission.

But there's another way. God also accomplishes His mission through His people, through the redeemed, as they live in ways that communicate who He is or reveal who He is to all the nations around them. Through God's people, all peoples are to come to know the one true God. God's people reveal the person of God and ultimately in that are integral to the accomplishment of God's mission. So through His people the Redeemer comes, and His people as the redeemed reveal Him to all.

It seems to me that the bulk of the Bible—in fact, I think you could argue every page in the Bible—has been given to God’s people to shape them, to instruct them, to guide them in the ways that they should be and live to accomplish God’s mission in the world. So who are we as we gather as those who confess Christ? We are the people of God’s mission, the ones through whom He will make Himself known so that His great mission can be accomplished.

Now think about it. Think about how often as a believing community we think about ourselves first and foremost as the people of God’s mission. I’m not sure that happens a lot. I think more often than not—as I think about myself as a child of God or as a part of the body of Christ—I think about that in terms of what I get from that. What’s in it for me? It’s that comfort that we want when we’re troubled. It’s the power of the Spirit to do what we believe God’s called us to do. It’s the truths to live by. It’s the hope of reconciliation. It’s forgiveness of sins. It’s all that has become a part of my experience because I’ve confessed faith in Christ, right?

But what if I flipped all that around and thought about it, not as what is just beneficial to me, but what is necessary for me to be a part of God’s mission in the world. In fact, what we’re going to see is this: everything God does for, to, within, and among His people is never just for their sake but is always for the sake of all peoples whom God desires would know and worship Him alone. Thinking of myself as a member of God’s people, of God’s mission, changes the way I view my own life, my salvation, my participation in the body of Christ. But it makes sense, doesn’t it? If the Bible is the book of God’s mission, then shouldn’t we identify ourselves as the people of God’s mission as well?