

READING THE WORLD'S GREATEST STORY

... and recognizing our place in the story ...

adapted from the International Bible Society

The Bible is one, great story. It is the real drama of God's grace calling and leading and loving a particular people in order to bring blessing to all people. All the different parts of the Bible come together to make up this one story. **To understand the Bible you must get to know its characters, understand its setting and follow its plot.**

Story is also a word that describes our own lives. Most of us try to follow the right rules, look into certain facts and attempt to live wisely. But none of those activities by themselves make sense of our lives. Stories help us see how all those things fit together and make sense. To understand our lives, we must recognize all the characters in our stories, understand where and how they fit in our story, and see how they all fit in the world's greatest Story.

The climax and ultimate resolution of that Story and our own stories will make sense only if you've been following the other parts of these stories. So come along; join us. Let's lose ourselves together in this great Story and explore together how our stories fit together with each other and with this, the world's Greatest Story.

The world's Greatest Story unfolds like a drama in five acts. In each act we will discover important ways in which our story fits a similar pattern.

Act I: CREATION – *the Good Earth*

The story begins with God already on the stage. He creates the world by “the **word** of his power”: He makes a man, Adam, and places him in the Garden of Eden to work in it and take care of it. **God's world is designed to function with humanity 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. In Scripture God calls this state of affairs “**good**.” And in that condition, his creation experiences “**peace**” (English for “**shalom**”). The relationship that mankind enjoys with God in the garden is what the Bible calls a “**covenant**.” At the end of the first chapter of Genesis, seeing that his creation perfectly conforms to his design, God says:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (v. 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 (good and wise) design for people and provides the setting for all the action that follows.

Act II: FALL – the ~~good~~ man

A conflict is introduced in the story when Adam and Eve think **they have a better idea** and decide to go **their own way** and seek **their own wisdom**. They listen to the deceptive voice of God's enemy, Satan, and doubt the goodness, wisdom, and trustworthiness of God and his design and strike out on their own. The Bible calls this problem, and the conflicts it breeds, **sin, idolatry, adultery, rebellion, arrogance, ignorance**.

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 the man 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 makes his **design** and **purpose** for his creation known, but part of his own creation decides they have a better plan. Their “better plan,” however, disrupts and destroys creation, introducing fear, shame, guilt, anger, and accusation. Now, instead of a life together of happiness and peace, life in the world is **cursed** with running, hiding, accusing, and fighting, in an effort to simply survive. Can God **rescue** and **restore** the relationship with humanity, removing the curse from creation?

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 – and our story.

Act III: REDEMPTION, Part 1: ISRAEL – a new man (for the world)

*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 temporarily narrows his focus to concentrate on one group of people in order to **bless all people, remove the curse from creation, and restore and renew the original relationship that existed in the garden**. God appoints a special sign to remind the people that they are “set apart” in order to “remove the curse” from the world (**Circumcision**).

Later, Abraham's descendants find themselves slaves in Egypt. Their slavery causes them to groan and cry out. This is when we see the real character of God revealed: God **hears** the cry of his people, God **comes** to his people, God **rescues** them and **restores** them to the land promised to them.

And God makes a **covenant** with this new nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai, He appoints Moses to lead them out of slavery - the Exodus. As part of this covenant, God once again makes his design clear: if his people trust him and live according to his design (what the Bible calls “**faith**”), they will flourish in their new land (what the Bible calls God’s “**blessing**”).

However, if Israel refuses to believe God and trust the goodness and wisdom of his design (what the Bible calls “**faithlessness**” or “**unbelief**”), God warns them that they will die and lose their life in the land (what the Bible calls God’s “**curse**”). Sadly, like us, the people repeatedly insist that they know better and so go their own way, chasing after the lies and false gods of the nations that surround them.

It appears to us that now, like Adam, Abraham's descendants have failed. But this is part of the good news of this great Story: **while his people apparently fail, God remains steadfastly committed to the promises he made** (this steadfast commitment of God is what the Bible calls “**steadfast love,**” “**steadfast mercy,**” or “**loving mercies**”).

Knowing that the people are stubbornly committed to doing things their own way, He builds into the **design** and **structure** of his people’s life three special offices (**Prophet, Priest, and King**), a special day (the **Sabbath**), a special place (the **Tabernacle**) and special practices (the **Sacrifices, the Festivals**) to ensure his intended outcomes (what the Bible calls “**sovereignty**”). **The Prophets** were appointed to speak God’s Words (what the Bible calls **law, commandment, wisdom**) to God’s people. **The Priests** were appointed to stand between a holy God and his sinful people to facilitate the **restoration** of relationship through **worship, prayer, and sacrifice**. **The Kings** were appointed to guide God’s people in **flourishing lives of holiness** among the nations. These three offices **mediated** the relationship between a holy God and his beloved, sinful people, through which he would bless his people and bless the nations.

One of Israel's kings, David, is especially noted for being “*a man after God's own heart.*” God promises to send another king to Israel, a son of David, who will **wisely** lead Israel, bringing the nation back to God (what the Bible calls “**repentance**”) and make them agents of God’s **blessing** to the peoples of the world.

Act III ends tragically, with God apparently absent and his people languishing in exile because of their rebellion. Nonetheless, the certain hope of his promise remains:

*“... All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”*
(Isaiah 40:6-8)

Act IV: REDEMPTION, Part 2: JESUS – *the True (Good) Man (for the world)*

Four centuries after their kingdom is destroyed and they are sent as slaves to another land, the people of Israel have now returned to the land of promise, but are suffering under Roman occupation, exiles in their own land. They are still waiting to be freed from their slavery. An angel of God comes to a young woman named Mary and announces,

You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 whom they torment. Jesus forgives the sins of those who humbly come to him. He proclaims the **gospel**, or **good news**, promised by Isaiah, that:

"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's blessing." (Luke 4:18-19, quoting from Isaiah 61)

also,

"The [long-awaited, promised] time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

The heart of Jesus' message is the good news that God is once again coming to restore His reign (what Scriptures call the **Kingdom of Heaven** or the **Kingdom of God**) **over his people and all creation.** Jesus' announcement, in other words, is that God has come back **to dwell with his people and restore forever his design and re-establish his reign over all life and creation so that it might once again flourish.** This is why Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

But Jesus' message receives mixed responses. Some people believe, recognizing in Jesus the goodness, wisdom, and truth of God. Most people simply watch him with amazement, never knowing quite what to make of him. Still others, the established religious leaders who thought they knew it all but who failed to recognize the glory of God in Jesus, 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 written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took 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 of unhindered fellowship with God at the **Table of God** in the **House of God.** In all of this Jesus shows himself to be the promised child of Abraham who **reconciles** humanity to God. It is through Jesus that Israel finally fulfills 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; he has always been the one and only hero of the story, from beginning (creation) to end (consummation).

Act V: CONSUMATION (THE NEW PEOPLE OF GOD in THE NEW CITY OF GOD) – *the New Mankind (for a “re-gooded” world)*

If the key victory has already been secured, why is there an Act V? Because God’s good, wise, and trustworthy design involves the extension of Jesus’ victory to all the nations of the world. Those who follow Jesus as the perfect fulfillment of God’s good, wise, and trustworthy design for his world are being built into God’s **new temple**, the place where God’s Spirit dwells in the midst of his people. God is gathering these people from all around the world and forming them into his **church**. When this is complete, Jesus will visibly and bodily return and the reign of God will become visible on the earth as it is in heaven, throughout the entirety of his creation (1 Corinthians 15:24-25). The curse imposed during Act II will have been completely removed (Revelation 22:3).

The task of bringing blessing to the peoples of the world has been given again to the descendants of Abraham. According to the New Testament, all those who belong to Christ are true children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). Act V emphasizes the co-mission of Christ-followers: to proclaim and live out together the liberating message of the good news of Christ’s kingdom by becoming, in our life-together, “Prosecutions’ Exhibit Number 1” set before the watching world as evidence of his present and powerful reign over all things to re-establish his City upon the earth. (Ephesians 5:1-14)

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 respond to Jesus? Who will we say that he is: liar, lunatic, or Lord? How will we fit into His continuing 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 impact 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.

FIND 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 Christ, 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**, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as 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.' eh 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:

"For 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.

GET 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 1: CREATION – the Good Earth

The creation, Genesis 1-2:3

Praise God for his creation, Psalm 8

Praise God for his glory seen in Creation and Law (the “Word” of his Good Character), Psalm 19

Praise to the Creator of all things, Psalm 104

Praise God for creating me, Psalm 139

Act II: THE FALL – the (good) man

The fall into sin, Genesis 3

Noah, the flood and the ark, Genesis 9:17

Even creation groans under the weight of our sin, Romans 8

A prayer of repentance, Psalm 51

'No one is righteous, Romans 3:9-26

Act III: REDEMPTION, Part 1: ISRAEL – a new man (for the world)

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 12:18-15:21

God's covenant with Israel, Exodus 19-20; 24

God keeps his promise, Joshua 23-24

Rahab the prostitute hides the Israelite spies, Joshua 2

David kills Goliath, 1 Samuel 17

David becomes king, 2 Samuel 5:1-

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: REDEMPTION, Part 2: JESUS – the True (Good) Man (for the world)

The birth of Jesus, Luke 1-2
The temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-1.3
The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7
Jesus shares his calling with the people, Luke 4:16-30
Jesus' teaching on prayer, Luke 11:1-13
The prodigal (lost) son, Luke 15
New birth, John 3
Jesus is the resurrection and the life, John 11
Three prayers of Jesus, John 17
The Lords 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 New Mankind (for a “re-Gooded” Earth)

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

HOW TO READ HIS STORY

Can you read the Bible like other stories? Not exactly. The Bible is a collection of books, 66 in all, that were written over a long period of time. **They tell the story of how God is working to set things right in our world.** But these books were written in a different time than ours, and that means you will need to keep some important things in mind as you read.

The key to reading the Bible is to remember two questions: *What did it mean then?* and *What does it mean now?* The first step in reading the Bible is to discover what the original author was saying. Once this is clear, ask yourself what it means for you today.

Here are some keys to finding what a Bible story or passage originally meant:

- + What kind of literature is being used: is it historical story? Law, guidance, or instruction? psalm (song)? letter? wisdom saying? Answering this question correctly will *help you to interpret the passage* correctly.
- + Where are *you* reading in the story? Where did these people live? What is happening around them(What is God telling them now? What happened before? What are they expecting to happen next?

As. in all stories, same things change and some things stay the same as **the story progresses.**

- + How does this passage fit into the message of other passages around it? It *is critical to* read the Bible *in context.* As *with any story, if you* pull isolated sayings out of context, you may change the meaning entirely.

As you move into thinking about what a Bible passage means for you today, keep these in mind:

- + Use common sense. God, is not trying to trick us or hide secret *meanings in* the Bible. *Some parts of* the Bible *are* difficult, *yet in most places* the *meaning can be* discerned clearly. *Look for the plain meaning of* the *text,* then *focus on what your response* should be.
- + Keep in mind the cultural differences between the Bible times and ours today. *When God is* teaching *an important principle for* living, *the way* that principle gets lived out *may look* very different in our day from what it looked like in the ancient world.
- + Remember where you are in the story. We are living after the death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, which is the climax of the Bible's whole story. The main event has happened. God has shown us what he 'is like by sending Jesus *to us.* Everything *you read* should be *shaped* by that fact.

The Bible is not primarily about you. It is the ancient story of God, the world and the people he called. Yet, this story has a place for you. In fact, the reason this story was saved and written down. is so that people like you could read it and find the true meaning for their lives . Our prayer is that you will read it and discover within it the life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:19).