

Mike Erre

Why
the Bible
Matters



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engage your faith

To Seth
May God give us a lifetime of surprises together.

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PART I
The Story We Find Ourselves In

Introduction: Why the Bible (Still) Matters

Ivan Illich was once asked what is the most revolutionary way to change society. Is it violent revolution or is it gradual reform? He gave a careful answer. Neither. If you want to change society, then you must tell an alternative story.

TIM COSTELLO

On September 18, 2008, my wife and I found out the child we were expecting (our third) had Down syndrome. At 22 weeks, we were given the option of terminating the pregnancy. We also discovered that roughly 92 percent of people receiving the same diagnosis at the same time choose that option.

How does a person make a decision like this? I have since reflected a lot on the journey Justina and I took as we went from hearing the news to seeing Seth born three months later. For us, abortion was never an option. We grieved and were frustrated, but ultimately we would receive Seth however God would give him to us. But I also can empathize with those for whom the thought of raising a Down syndrome child was too much. (Of course, this doesn't justify their decision to abort, but I can relate to the feelings of being overwhelmed.)

What guides us in moments like these, when reality comes crashing

into our lives without any thought of our preferences or desires? Is it pure self-interest that guides us? What maximizes pleasure or minimizes pain? What will other people think of our decision? What does Oprah or Dr. Phil or Dr. Laura think we should do?

I am convinced that most of us live according to a narrative, a story that governs our lives and gives them structure, form, and shape (more about this later). These narratives answer the basic questions about us: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? What is right? What is wrong? Can we even know these things?

We carry these narratives unconsciously until we encounter situations that don't fit into the ways we normally make decisions and choices and deliberate about our lives. In those situations, we are exposed. We may normally give lip service to creeds, mutter token prayers, or quote pithy and inspiring slogans, but such things ring hollow in a crisis. The flannel-board Bible stories we heard in Sunday school aren't adequate for the demands of adult life.

Then we discover what kind of story we are actually living by. When we are sick of our spouses and want to divorce, when we can earn a ton of money by taking a few moral shortcuts, when a diagnosis puts life in perspective, or when every fiber in our being yearns to hurt those who hurt us—that's when we find out what the narrative of our lives really is.

One of the many reasons the Bible still matters is that it reveals the weaknesses of the stories of our world and tells an alternative story. And it is not just any story; it is the true story.

The scriptures paint a picture of an alternative reality, of life in another world. In this world, God raises the dead and breathes hope into every corner of the universe. In this world, all things are possible with God—virgin births, miraculous healings, cosmic warfare. Life is infused with holiness and worth, and people are valued far beyond their ability to produce or consume. In this reality, blessings can come disguised as the loss of the job, a health crisis, or the birth of a

special-needs baby. Justina and I have come to believe that Jesus turns the world upside down, and as a result, we think and choose, live and spend, and act and relate differently than we would otherwise. Years of reading and studying the scriptures and listening to sermons about the Bible have formed us into people who (usually) believe that the world it describes is the real world. Without such a basis, I don't know how we would have made our decision about Seth.

So why does the Bible matter? Why should we wade through the *begats* (as my mom calls them) of this ancient book when we already have so little time to do so? My answer is simply this: The Bible reveals the world as it really is. It is not (primarily) a theological textbook, a body of laws and regulations, or a collection of nice moral stories. It is a story that presents a different way of seeing the world and our lives in it.

The biblical narrative is true, good, and right. It makes sense of our experience and the experiences of others. But the art and science of seeing the Bible in this way has been mostly lost in the Western world. Here, the Bible is been dissected, analyzed, cataloged, and categorized nearly into irrelevance. Even believers approach the Bible somewhat as if it were a museum artifact—pulling it off a shelf now and again, looking at and admiring it—rather than the dynamic and dangerous word of God it claims to be. Christians seem to spend a lot of time and energy defending the Bible when they could be engaging it in a consistently honest and meaningful way.

Ultimately the biblical narrative is subversive to all other narratives. In other words, it serves as the fundamental basis for everything else. We insist that the Bible gives a truer, more accurate account of what is going on in our seemingly unraveling world than do our advertisers, politicians, and journalists.

Looking at the scriptures this way helps us to be intellectually honest—grappling deeply with questions about the inspiration, transmission, and interpretation of the text—while at the same time holding a high view of the Bible. I believe we can hold the tremendous unity

and clarity of the Bible—the story of God’s quest to redeem what He has made—in tension with the utter mystery of many of its parts. But to do this we need to reframe our view of what the Bible is and what we expect it to do.

Writing a book about the Bible feels a bit like digging a hole in my backyard and calling it the Grand Canyon. Regardless of how well I dig or how deep I go, my hole will never compare to the real thing. So here’s my first piece of advice for you: Buy yourself a Bible and begin to read it if you haven’t already. When you read the Bible humbly and honestly, it speaks for itself. You don’t need to go to seminary, learn Greek or Hebrew, or ask an expert in order to understand the basic message. Anyone anywhere can pick up the scriptures and benefit.

But at the same time, the Bible is clearly more than it first appears. Far beyond a list of do’s and don’ts, rights and wrongs, laws and commandments, it combines poetry, narrative, parable, apocalypse, gospel, and more into a combustible mix that can be used for great good or great harm. Skinheads and cultists appeal to the Bible for authority, as do great social and moral reformers. The Bible is at the center of faith for billions of people, and it still stands as the most dramatic, controversial, and inspiring piece of literature ever put together.

And yet for all its acclaim, the Bible remains a mystery to most of us. Yes, all of us can pick it up and benefit, but we can also spend the rest of our lives plumbing its depths and never reach the bottom. From the prophets’ cryptic mutterings to the bizarre images in Revelation, the Christian scriptures present us with a paradox: How do we reconcile the lofty view of the Bible espoused by millions—that it is the inerrant and inspired word of God—with the reality that most of us don’t really understand what it is, let alone what it says. Many of us simply don’t try to read, study, or apply the Bible much at all. For all of our defending of the Bible, few of us take it seriously.

How can you take the Bible seriously? That’s the subject of this book.

The True Story of the World

*The Christian story claims to be the true
story about God and the world.*

N.T. WRIGHT

Reality can only be partially attacked by logic.

FRIEDRICH DURRENMATT

My kids love jigsaw puzzles. That means I have had to learn to love puzzles too. I have discovered what any puzzle lover already knows: The most important part of the puzzle is the box top, which shows the big picture. Of course, we still have to do the hard work of placing the individual pieces together, but the box top gives us a general sense of how best to proceed.

Many of us approach the Bible as a bunch of individual puzzle pieces without any real sense of how they all fit together. We lack a box top that gives us the big picture. And without it, many of us struggle to make sense of the individual pieces. How do Jesus' words to love our enemies fit with the psalmist's request for God to dash his enemies' children against the rocks? Or how do the obscure and esoteric words and pictures of the prophets fit into the straightforward history of Acts? We have a vague sense that it should all fit together, but we don't know how.

So for the most part, we approach the Bible individualistically and atomistically. We read the gospels as individual and independent stories about Jesus and rarely consider the way they are edited and arranged. We read about the people in the Old Testament—Moses or Joseph or Esther or David—without any sense of how these stories advance the grand narrative of God’s mission to redeem what He has made.

We may approach the book of Proverbs for practical guidance and advice about living, parenting, running a business, or dating. Others of us may turn to 1 Corinthians 13, Psalm 23, the Beatitudes, or the Lord’s Prayer for comfort and inspiration. In fact, if your Bible doesn’t include a list of what passages to read when you are depressed or worried or sad, you can find one at the nearest Christian bookstore. Still others of us love the intellectual challenge of unraveling the paradoxes in the Bible. What’s the deal with blood sacrifice or predestination or hell? How does Paul’s emphasis on faith fit with James’ emphasis on works? Was there one blind man or two, and did Jesus encounter him (or them) while entering Jericho or leaving it? Those who read the Bible this way often look for a verse or story that will support their position.

But all of these approaches ignore the fact that although the Bible was written by many authors over hundreds of years, it presents one unified story—the story of God’s creative and redemptive work in the world.¹ And it is precisely in understanding the Bible as one overarching narrative that all the rest of it begins to make sense. The problem with approaching the Bible in one of these other ways—for guidance, challenge, or inspiration—is that we use the Bible for what *we* want and don’t allow God to use it to form and shape us according to what He wants.

We must move beyond reading the Bible for our purposes and learn to receive it according to the authors’ intentions. We must learn to read the Bible as it is presented to us and not always in the way we want, molding and shaping it to reinforce our own preferences, prejudices, or desires. And to do *that*, we must see the Bible as a unified whole.

Yes, this story does consist of many other stories, but each smaller story advances the narrative arc of the whole.

This story develops over a long time, so we must continually reconnect each individual part—a proverb, song, poem, prophecy, or parable—to the whole. Further, as the story advances, each scene sheds new light on the earlier parts of the story.

One Story or Many?

I grew up hearing that the Bible is composed of many kinds (or genres) of literature: poetry and history, parable and sermon, letter and genealogy, oracles and prophecies, songs and visions. And of course, there were stories. Loads of them. Stories about Jesus, about David and Goliath, Noah and the ark, Joseph and the famine in Egypt... But it never occurred to me to ask if the whole Bible fell into its own category. Now I believe it does. It is one unified story that is made up of a lot of individual pieces and parts, and the overriding narrative of the biblical story shapes these individual parts. The songs, letters, and genealogies make the most sense when we see them embedded in the larger plotline—the narrative thread that binds together the authors, books, and types of literature in the Bible.

That the Bible is one story should be apparent simply from the way it begins in Genesis with God creating the heavens and earth (Genesis 1:1) and ends in Revelation with the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1). The biblical story works, of course, on many different levels and with many types of literature within it. Much of it doesn't read like a typical story, but such material makes full sense only within the broader story line.

Far from being a random mix of law, prophecy, poem, theology, and history, the Bible is a unified and progressively unfolding drama—the story of God's intention and work to redeem and restore what He has made—and each individual bit must be understood in the context of the whole. And God intends that whole story to be the framework that guides His people as they live, relate, and work in the world.

Every culture has an overriding narrative that shapes its collective consciousness. When we look at only the individual pieces of the Bible, we may misunderstand or distort them. Or we may remain myopic and individualistic, using the Bible for our purposes instead of submitting to God's purposes for us in it. But the greatest danger is that we will continue to live by other stories and interpret the Bible according to *them*. And that's a problem because most of the dominant values and narratives of the Western world are antithetical to the narrative of scripture. Make no mistake: We do live our lives according to a narrative (a framework, or a way of looking at the world) even if we cannot articulate what it is. So the question is not *whether* we live according to some overriding narrative but rather which one. Our stories shape us, and we shape our stories. The people of God have been called out of the patterns and narratives of this world and into something far truer, richer, and deeper—the story of God and His work in the world.

Our modern Western stories are so engrained in our minds that we naturally use them to interpret the biblical story. These other (misleading) stories are insidious because they are so foundational to the way we look at ourselves and the world. We rarely notice them, let alone call them into question. But that is precisely what we must do, for the Bible assumes (and the earliest Christians believed) that it alone tells the true story of our world.

Stories and Truth

Looking at the Bible this way may feel a bit odd to some of us because we grew up approaching the scriptures in search of timeless truth and doctrinal propositions. And certainly the Bible contains truth and doctrine and more besides. But those truths and propositions are housed in a narrative structure. They are not presented to us as abstract ideas disconnected from time, place, or culture. Just the opposite, in fact. A narrative arc (or structure) connects the many movements within the Bible. Our modern obsessions with doctrinal and theological fastidiousness have

blinded many of us to the rich images, allusions, symbols that permeate the Bible because of our search for the truth (or moral or point) behind the story. In our never-ending quest for the bottom line, we miss the significance of the journey along the way.

For instance, Jesus didn't describe God's love with three principles in alliteration. He told a story about a man who had two sons. When asked about loving one's neighbor, He told the story of the Good Samaritan. He used images (pearls, seeds, nets, soil) and symbols (temple, wind, bread) that were embedded in everyday Jewish life to communicate the truth about the kingdom of God.

Similarly, when God gave the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai, He began by saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." The commandments that God gave Israel are not abstracted tidbits of morality. Instead, they are connected to an event that was very fresh in their minds—the powerful work of God to deliver them from Egypt. That story connected the commandments to the nation and to God. The God who spoke to the Israelites and commanded them to worship and obey is the same God who led them out of Egypt and promised to establish the nation in the Promised Land. Israel's God can be identified only by telling this story.

In the Old Testament, God's name and the story of His works go together. The Bible does not allow for disembodied, theoretical truths floating out there in creeds and doctrinal statements; it is rooted and grounded in history through and through. It deals with particular characters and events unfolding over real time and real places.

So when I say the Bible matters because it tells an alternative story, I am not suggesting that the Bible is a fable, myth, or fairy tale. On the contrary, I have become convinced that we are impoverished because we have *reduced* the Bible down to propositions, steps, and principles. It is so much bigger and deeper and truer than that. The Bible is presented to us as a story for a reason, and I want to bring a needed correction to our fascination with defending, defining, and "doctrinalizing" (I

needed another *d* word) at the expense of the rich and varied literary forms and structures that communicate at least as much truth as do propositions. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright highlights the nature and importance of stories:

When we examine how stories work in relation to other stories, we find that human beings tell stories because this is how we perceive, and indeed relate to, the world... A story...is, if we may infer from the common practice of the world, universally perceived as the best way of talking about the way the world actually is... If Jesus or the evangelists tell stories, this does not mean that they are leaving history or theology out of the equation and doing something else instead.²

Why a Story?

Beyond a rule book, a systematic theology textbook, or a collection of inspiring sayings, the Bible presents itself to us as a story that describes the way the things really are. Stories, simply by virtue of their form, come to us less directly and immediately than propositional statements or doctrinal creeds. Stories, like those things, can either be true or false, but unlike them, stories leave room for our participation. God could have revealed Himself to us in any number of ways, but He chose to do it through narrative. We can reflect a bit on why He chose story as opposed to anything else.

Younger generations don't need to be convinced of the power of story. In their world, a cold, logical, abstract argument holds little value. They intuitively embrace imagination, mystery, ambiguity, and tension. Something is lost, of course, in the transition from more classically rational ways of understanding and discoursing, but much more is gained. When we read the Bible as a story, we allow it to speak for itself. On the other hand, when we argue about whether Adam and Eve had belly buttons, the message of the Bible can't get a word in

edgewise. Stories are rational in their own way. They convey truth as do propositions, but they gain greater hearing these days.

How We Know Each Other

Stories are the most common way people relate to each other. When two people go on their first date and begin to get to know each other and share themselves with each other, they don't read each other's résumé. They tell stories about where they grew up and what they like to do. In cultures all over the world, stories are handed down from parents to children and repeated around the dinner table or campfire, reinforcing values, ideals, norms, and structures. They are the most accessible forms of speech: Young or old, educated or illiterate, anyone can savor a good story. In this digital age, where mountains of important or trivial information come to us in the form of raw data, stories help make sense of the overall scheme of things. For all our sophistication and expertise, we remain unsure of how best to run our lives. We need a narrative that speaks the truth about who we are, who God is, and why life is the way it is.

Stories reveal things to us in ways nothing else can. Propositions tell us things; stories show them to us. They draw us into relationship and open up new worlds to us in ways that textbooks or rule books never can. In the Bible, *knowing* is always relational. When the Bible says that Adam knew his wife, it doesn't mean that Adam could list Eve's interests, but rather that Adam and Eve knew each other sexually and thus intimately and personally. The scriptures always assume that to *know* something is to know it with both the head and the heart. The two are always inseparably connected.

The Bible is God revealing Himself—showing us what He is like—in ways that transcend merely telling us (in an informational way) about His nature. This is not like the way we engage a textbook on mathematics or a dusty tome about copyright law. No, this is encountering a person in the pages of a text. The Bible is revelatory, not just informational. Story is the only form that allows for such personal

engagement. When Jesus taught about the kingdom, He never gave a textbook definition. Instead, He told stories and parables that illuminated those who had ears to hear and hearts to receive the truth He revealed.

It's a Big World After All

Stories enlarge our world. Suppose you lived your whole life in a small village in the bottom of a valley that was surrounded by mountains. Suppose also that you were never allowed to climb the surrounding hillsides and had never heard anyone talk about life outside the village. Once you become an adult, however, you decide to see for yourself what lies beyond your small piece of the world. Imagine how you feel when you climb one of the peaks and discover that you live on a small island in the middle a vast ocean dotted by other islands. As your view stretches endlessly from horizon to horizon, you realize the world is much bigger than what you had previously known. Your village never looks the same after that. The limited perspective you once lived by is gone forever.

This is what stories do to us—they open up whole new worlds, provide us with unique and dissimilar perspectives, and cause us to look at our own lives a bit differently. They pull us out of ourselves and into a larger universe, stretching our imaginations and lives beyond their original shape. And this is also what the Bible does—it opens up a new and yet strangely familiar world of creation and conflict, angels and demons, sin and redemption. Beyond what we have learned (or figured out on our own), the scriptures open up a world with God, a world in which all things are possible.

The Bible is not one story among many stories; it is *the* story, of which all others are but faint echoes. Stories enlarge our world, and the biblical story most of all.

We are not accustomed to thinking about the Bible this way. We talk of “bringing the Bible to life” or “making the Bible relevant to our lives” as if our lives were large and the Bible should fit into them. But

that is exactly the opposite of what is really the case. The Bible is the vast, true world, and our tiny, sin-constricted lives desperately need to fit into *that*. The scriptures crack open our narcissistic shells and expose us to a “God-bathed world,” to use Dallas Willard’s beautiful phrase. The world of the Bible is far larger than the world of television and the Internet. This is the fundamental change many of us must make: to quit trying to fit the Bible into our lives and begin seeing our lives in it.

You’re Invited

Stories invite us to participate. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) may be the most well-known story Jesus told. A father has two sons, the younger of which demands his inheritance in advance. Inexplicably, the father acquiesces to his son’s wishes, and soon the son is off blowing his wealth on what the Bible politely calls “wild living.” As we all know, the son eventually becomes destitute, returns to his senses, and makes the journey home. The father sees his son in the distance, runs to embrace him, and throws a party to celebrate his homecoming. We then meet an older son, who, resentful at the party thrown in honor of his irresponsible brother, refuses to join in the celebration. The story ends with the father pleading with the older son, and then...

That’s it. No resolution, no happy ending. No sudden twist, no big surprise. Jesus simply ends the parable right there. Jesus told two other parables before this one, all to answer Pharisees who criticized Him for spending too much time with “sinners.” I believe Jesus ends His story in this way precisely so the Pharisees might find themselves in it. The parable is actually about two lost sons, not just one. The younger son’s rebellion is not the only issue or even the main issue; the pride, self-righteousness, and ingratitude of the older, law-keeping brother causes him to be lost as well. The story ends without resolution. The ending is up to each of us.

Good stories leave much to the imagination so we can find ourselves in them. They don’t give us all the details or fill in all the blanks.

Stories allow us to continue the drama in our heads and hearts. They invite us to identify with their characters, feel the weight of their emotions, and imagine ourselves in their world.

What is true of the parable is true of the Bible as a whole. When we read it properly, the Bible pulls us out of ourselves and invites (sometimes demands) participation in the world it describes. Our attempts, then, on getting a bit of the Bible (or God, for that matter) into our lives is totally misguided. The scriptures draw us in to meet God on His terms, and its narrative form as well as its overall narrative arc (God working to redeem fallen humanity and restore creation) calls for our involvement in it.

How do we teach children the Bible? We tell them stories: Noah and his ark, David and the giant, Daniel and the lions, Jonah and the whale, Mary and her baby, Peter on the water, and Jesus. The Bible allows our kids to enter into its world through the stories it tells. Or to use another example, when we attend a funeral, how do we celebrate the life of someone we loved? We tell stories. We don't just talk in abstract terms about the person. We say, "Do you remember the time...?" In this way, we are drawn into the loved one's life again and again. Kenneth E. Bailey, an author who has spent decades in the Middle East studying the New Testament, explains the way Bible stories do their work:

A biblical story is not simply a "delivery system" for an idea. Rather, the story first creates a world and then invites the listener to live in that world, to take it on as part of who he or she is... In reading and studying the Bible, ancient tales are not examined merely in order to extract a theological principle or ethical model.³

Going Deeper

Stories have layers of meaning. Stories are always embedded in a cultural context, yet they transcend context better than any other literary form. If we return to the parable of prodigal son, we can read it and

grasp its main point without any knowledge whatsoever of first-century Jewish culture. Stories reach far beyond their cultural setting.

When we do study the cultural context, however, we notice detail and nuance in the parable that would otherwise escape us. For instance, in that day, the younger son's request was a clear statement that the money meant more to him than his father did. In effect, he was saying he wished his father were dead. And the father's acceptance of the arrangement was equally as scandalous. Finally, in Jewish culture, the head of a household would never *run*, so the father's dramatic and hurried response to his son's return is even more surprising. Like King David, who "defiled himself" centuries earlier by dancing before the Lord, this father was so filled with joy, he never noticed (or didn't care) that he humiliated himself.

You get the picture. Stories can translate between cultures effectively, and yet knowledge of those cultures allows us to find new shades of meaning and significance that deepen our understanding of the stories and their impact on our lives.

We may read about the plagues God sent against Pharaoh and Egypt and understand that God was releasing Israel from bondage. Yet when we learn a bit about ancient Egyptian religion, we discover that God targeted each plague at a particular Egyptian deity. (That's why God says, "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt" in Exodus 12:12.) Far from being natural occurrences or random series of judgments, the plagues display God's greatness and power over the false gods of Egypt. The main point of the Exodus narrative stays the same, but the cultural details add depth and richness to the story and deepen our appreciation of God.

The Subversive Nature of Storytelling

Stories can be incredibly subversive. The most powerful journalism is storytelling. I can read statistics about the rise in autism, or I can meet Brian, a sweet five-year-old who lives in our area who struggles to interact socially with his peers and is still learning how to talk.

Which is more moving, the statistics or the story? The story, of course. As Ivan Illich so powerfully states, telling an alternative story is the surest way to revolution. N.T. Wright agrees:

Human life, then, can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another. . . . Stories thus provide a vital framework for experiencing the world. They also provide a means by which views of the world may be challenged. . . . Stories are, actually, particularly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews. Where head-on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety.⁴

Isn't that what we read in the book of Acts as the disciples begin to announce the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? As they testify to the reality of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes, they (consciously or not) begin to subvert Jewish narratives of the day, such as these: There is no Messiah to be expecting, there is no resurrection of the dead, and Rome must be defeated by strength of arms. When Paul began his missionary efforts in Roman Asia Minor and insisted that Jesus is *Lord*, he boldly co-opted a title that the Caesars had reserved for themselves. The imagery of the book of Revelation was also seditious. It suggested that much of the propaganda of Roman emperor worship was misplaced and even demonic, that Jesus is greater than earthly rulers, and that He alone is Lord.

The Bible is the most subversive story ever written. As we look at each stop along the narrative arc of the scriptures, we'll see how the biblical story indicts the major narratives that govern our lives as Westerners in the twenty-first century and offers something much better, truer, and larger.

The Story God Tells

Of course, some stories are good and true, and others are bad and false. Stories also differ in their purposes. Some entertain, some teach, some remind, some provide warnings. And some stories reveal the foundation and base of our worldview. They attempt to answer the big questions of life. These stories are the most important ones even though we don't often think about them.

The Bible offers the truest story of the whole world—all of life, history, experience, culture, and civilization are encompassed in its pages. To see the Bible as the truest story is not to say that the story helps us function well or that it was passed down to us merely as a cultural inheritance. The scriptures must be taken seriously because they claim to tell us the true story from the creation of the universe all the way to its re-creation. Not one moment is left out of its pages. The content of the Bible lies at the very core of reality. This is the way the world really is.

If we don't read the scriptures this way, if we try to fit them into our individual or collective modern stories, we lose the full reality of God and His work in our world. Our world shrinks as well. The story of the Bible is the story of enlargement, not reduction. In God's world, a teenage virgin wakes up one day to discover she will give birth to the promised Messiah, a lowly fisherman becomes a cornerstone of the church, murderers and prostitutes turn into saints, and our ordinary world becomes a vessel for the holy. Modern narratives seek to reduce us, making us out to be nothing more than our synapses, impulses, or environmental conditioning. The scriptures call us into a much larger world, and in so doing, they beckon us beyond the reach of our wills and experiences.

Parts of this story are repeated in worship and liturgy, recited in creeds, and reenacted in baptism and communion. But to get the full measure, we need the whole of the Bible from beginning to end. The scriptures narrate the essential story we live in as God's people in the world. We can proclaim our belief that the Bible is God's word, but

until we allow it to define us to this degree, our hollow words are nothing more than lip service.

The Bible was written by many different authors across hundreds of generations and is now organized into 66 different books. To get a handle on its great and grand story and trace its narrative arc, we must utilize the largest biblical categories we can find. We can delineate these categories in different ways, but some consistency in the overall picture remains. The scriptures present a multiact drama of salvation that unifies the Bible as a whole story. The stories about Jesus, for instance, are presented in continuity with the stories about Israel and make sense only in that narrative framework. Jesus cannot be abstracted from the rest of the biblical story. “As the fulfillment of creation and the story of Israel, Jesus initiates the life of the church that witnesses to the coming new creation.”⁵

Very simply, the overall story line goes something like this: God creates the world and everything in it. His creatures rebel, allowing sin and death to mar all that God made. God is rescuing and restoring creation and will renew it completely sometime in the future.

At the beginning, the triune God created everything in the universe and declared it all to be good. Human beings, bearing the imprint of their Creator’s image, were made for relationship (with God and each other) and dominion (caring for God’s world). They originally existed in perfect harmony (right relationship) with God, creation, and each other (Genesis 1–2).

Sin entered the world when God’s creatures rebelled against His good and gracious rule, subjecting all aspects of God’s good creation (including people) to corruption and decay (Genesis 3–11).

God immediately began to redeem what sin had corrupted. He invited one man, Abram, to live again under His reign. From Abraham (as we know him now) came the nation of Israel, which foreshadows and leads up to God’s saving work in Christ.

Jesus came to earth to inaugurate God’s reinstated kingdom, through which God will rescue the world and reinstate His original

intentions for it. The Creator of all things has now become the Redeemer, and through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth accomplished for us what we could not do for ourselves. He announced that the redemptive work of God is present in the kingdom of God and is available to anyone who calls on Him. He reversed what resulted through our rebellion and frees us from the power and consequences of sin and death.

The Bible teaches that God's work in the world is comprehensive. He is seeking to restore all of creation to its original design and goodness. The salvation of individuals is the most important part, but it is not the whole of God's work. This teaching makes some people nervous, so let me clarify.

The biblical picture of restoration and renewal extends to all of creation. But that does not suggest that somehow the earth itself is divine (pantheism) or that all people everywhere will live with God in His new world (universalism). Rather, the scriptures reveal that human beings and the created world around them are tied together in sin and fallenness, in redemption and restoration (Romans 8).

The through-line in each of these sections is the kingdom of God. I have suggested elsewhere that the kingdom is the major (but not only) way of framing God's work of redemption.⁶ *The kingdom God* is a descriptive name for His reign and rule over His people and eventually over all creation. Many of the covenants of the Bible are (or will be) fulfilled by the King in His kingdom. They define the relationship between the King and His subjects. As we enter into a relationship with God, we come under His governance, and His will is done. This rule and reign eventually will make its way through all of creation (more about that later).

N.T. Wright has offered his own overview of the central story of the Bible in the form of a five-act play, with most of the fifth act missing.⁷ Bartholomew and Goheen suggest that Wright follows the structure of dramatic storytelling in the Western tradition:

The five acts [of traditional Western dramatic storytelling] are generally organized this way: (1) The first act gives us essential background information, introduces the important characters, and establishes the stable situation that will be disrupted by the events about to unfold. (2) The first action begins usually with the introduction of a significant conflict. The middle of the play (3) is where the main action of the drama takes place. Here the initial conflict intensifies and grows ever more complicated until (4) the climax, or point of highest tension, after which that conflict must be resolved, one way or the other. After climax comes (5) the resolution, in which the implications of the climactic act are worked out for all the characters of the drama, and stability is restored.⁸

Wright uses this structure in his presentation of the overarching narrative of the Bible:

Act 1: Creation

Act 2: The Fall

Act 3: Israel

Act 4: Jesus

Act 5: The Church

We live in the time of act 5, in which we improvise a suitable second scene, moving toward the conclusion God has revealed.⁹

Bartholomew and Goheen show that there is another act yet to come, in which Jesus returns and all things are made new.¹⁰ Wright's analysis has been very helpful, but we will adopt a slightly different structure here. I see these acts in the narrative arc of the scriptures:

Act 1: Creation

Act 2: The Fall

Act 3: Redemption (of which Israel, Jesus, and the church are all parts)

Act 4: Restoration (the renewal of all creation)

The creation account tells us what is right and good about people and the created order. The record of the fall tells us what went wrong in us and in creation. Redemption is the process of reversing the effects of the fall and is the foundation of the Creator's plan to restore everything to its original goodness and rightness. Restoration (or renewal or new creation) is the perfect completion of God's work of redemption, in which all things are made new.

PART 2
The Story of God

The Beginning and the Time Before That

In the beginning God...

The majority of the Bible's story line describes God's work of redemption and restoration (Genesis 12–Revelation 22), but that doesn't mean that what happens prior to that is unimportant. In fact, people are often confused about our world and God's work in it because they neglect the first two parts of the biblical narrative: creation (Genesis 1–2) and the fall (Genesis 3–11). We cannot understand the full scope and beauty of God's salvation until we first understand God's original intent and the damage to God's good creation that resulted from the fall.

Surely the most important words in the history of human civilization are these: "In the beginning God..." This declaration—with no introduction, no argument for God's existence—sets the stage for all that follows. These four words open up limitless possibilities about the nature and reality of the universe. God's existence prior to the creation defines and shapes human culture.

We think of the Bible as a record of humanity's search for God, but the truth is precisely the opposite—it is a record of His pursuit of us. The Bible begins and ends with God. He is at the center of the

universe; we are not. This is His story, and our stories find their proper place in His.

God did not need to create (as if He were lonely), nor did He create on a whim or by accident. Nothing compelled God to create. The rest of the Bible reveals that the one God (who is one being and also a relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit) creates as an overflow of the love and joy that characterize His internal, relational life (see John 17).

This is the God who “created the heavens and the earth.” The kingdom of God is the domain over which God rules. In Genesis 1–2, we see God ruling over all and simply speaking the universe into existence. The power of His word is the power of creation. God creates all things (“the heavens and the earth”) as an expression of His will.

God exists before (or outside of) His creation and brings all things into existence *ex nihilo*. He is the Creator-King who speaks His creation into existence from His throne and by His word. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’”

Creator and creation are thus distinct from the outset. God is not in creation, nor is the universe simply part of His nature. The scriptures begin with the self-sufficient God commanding matter and energy however He wants to and with an end in mind. In Genesis 1–2, God’s kingdom is established over and through creation—things are the way He wants them to be. Night and day, sea and land, sun and moon all obey His decrees. He sits over creation as King, not needing to create (as if He were deficient in some way until He did) but rather worthy of praise as Creator (see, for example, Revelation 4:11) because the universe stands as a testimony to His goodness and power (see Romans 1:20). As God creates, He names the parts of creation (such as land and sea) as an expression of His sovereignty over them.

Genesis I

God fills and separates and in so doing creates order (seasons and days and years) and purpose. God’s creation isn’t static but instead

includes possibilities—plants and seeds, trees and fruit, and animals that fly or swim or crawl on the ground, all able to reproduce “according to their kind.”

The theme of separation runs through Genesis 1. God orders and delineates and defines. He creates limits and boundaries. Out of the chaos of verse 2, the dark and formless void, God brings order and purpose. Each day builds upon the next (probably in parallel). Living things are created according to their kind. This is another theme that runs throughout the creation account.

All of this is well-known to those of us familiar with the Bible. But unfortunately, most of our Christian stories do not start here. They usually start in Genesis 3 with the fall of humanity into sin, and they focus on God’s redemption of what He has made. But the central features of the creation narratives are crucial, for they reveal God’s original intent for His creation. They help us to see that people and the world they inhabit were specially designed to fulfill God’s purposes. And this, as we’ll see in the next chapter, has powerful ramifications for how we live today.

It Was Good

The creation story repeatedly declares that God was pleased with what He had made. Being created, then, is a good thing. This sounds pretty obvious, I know, but over the course of history, many of God’s children have lost sight of this fundamental part of the story and decided that being physical was bad or unspiritual. Genesis begins with God delighting in what He has made, affirming its goodness for His purposes and according it worth because of His pleasure in it. When we read the Bible, we must keep this in mind: Creation is a reflection of God’s goodness, order, and intelligence, so it is essentially good. Having a body is a good thing. Needing food, drink, air, love...all of this is good. Our material existence is and always has been good. The material world is not inferior to or somehow less spiritual than the rest of our existence.

All of God's world contained the rightness He intended for it. He embedded everything with integrity and an inclination toward His purposes. As a result, He receives honor in and through the entire created order and especially through humans' responsible and caring stewardship of the world.

Made in the Image

Genesis 1:26 records God speaking from His throne in the plural. Perhaps God is speaking to His heavenly court, the sea of angels gathered before Him. Or God could be using the *royal plural* or *plural of majesty*, as when the queen of England might say, "We are not amused." Or this could be a tantalizing hint of the plurality within God's one nature. That He is speaking to His court seems to me to be the more probable.

God made human beings in His own image. The poetic refrain of the first part of Genesis 1 ceases when God creates human beings. He made plants and animals "according to their kinds," but He made humans according to His own kind (that is, in His image and likeness). *Image* and *likeness* are two ways of saying the same thing. Though we are not divine ourselves, our nature is somehow like God's. And the immediate connection between our image and God's image is rulership: "Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth." This mandate is repeated in verse 28: "God blessed them 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.'"

Humanity alone shares God's image, especially in one important way. Kings and rulers in the ancient Near East placed sculptures and engravings of themselves in distant territories of their kingdoms to signify their dominion over those lands. Human beings bear God's image and likeness as representatives of His rule over the earth. We live under God's rule and extend it throughout creation as vice-regents or co-governors. He invites us to develop the possibilities latent within creation in ways that bring honor and glory to Him.

Our rule over the earth should parallel God's rule over us. We are responsible for the land, water, air, plants, animals, and other natural resources. Our part in the creation story is to care for the earth because in so doing we bring glory to the Creator and fulfill an essential part of our humanity. As God works for the good of humanity, so too humanity must work for the good of the created order. We steward or manage creation in ways that embody God's own care for and delight in the created order. Under His overarching dominion, we are given a small piece of dominion for our own. Bartholomew and Goheen put it this way:

To be human means to have huge freedom and responsibility, to respond to God and to be held accountable for that response. Thus, a better way of expressing the concept of humankind's "dominion" over creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God's creation so that the whole of it may celebrate his glory.¹

In other words, humans are called to steward creation in a way that advances God's reputation. We were given this work before the fall, so it is part of our original design. Our stewardship role reminds us that the world is not static; it is going somewhere, and the image of God in us includes the assignment to direct it toward God-honoring and beneficial ends. It also gives us a great range of volition and freedom as we fulfill this responsibility. God gave us moral, intellectual, emotional, and relational capacities so we could fulfill this calling.

The command has two parts. We fulfill the first part, "be fruitful and multiply," by building families, cities, governments, and businesses. The second part, "subdue the earth," doesn't mean that we should pillage, pollute, or strip-mine the world. Instead, we are to harness the natural world and steer it toward God-honoring, human-benefitting ends. We do this in many ways: We plant and cultivate, build and design, compose and paint.

This first command given to humanity is often called the *creation* or *cultural* mandate. God asks us to bring every single human cultural activity into His realm and rule. Art, politics, law, business... every aspect of human cultural existence provides an opportunity to honor God. As corulers with God and under God, we create just as He has created. In this way, we extend the blessedness of living under God's good dominion to every part of the world.²

Only human beings are made for this kind of relationship with God. We are also made to reflect God's character in this world. When God created us in His image, He placed us on this planet as a sign that it belongs to Him. It is His creation. We are created not only to relate to Him but also to rule the planet with the authority He has delegated to us. We are the signs that this is God's earth.

Male and Female He Created Them

Gender distinctions are essential parts of humanity. Image bearers are either male or female, but they express God's image most fully when they are in relationship. This leaves room for no subordination or inferiority between the sexes whatsoever. In fact, it demonstrates their complete equality before God.

Genesis 2

The first two chapters of Genesis complement each other. In Genesis 1, God is the *transcendent* Creator who speaks, and it is so. In Genesis 2, God is the *immanent* Creator who forms Adam from dust and breathes the breath of life into Him. When we compare these two accounts, we have an example of Hebrew parallelism. This is how the Hebrew mind works, so it is no surprise that the seven days of creation in Genesis 1 are followed by an extended narrative of the sixth day of creation in Genesis 2. This is an example of synthetic parallelism—the second account fleshes out the first account. Both climax or center in the creation of humankind.

Genesis 2:4 begins human history. The generations in Genesis 2:4

begin to live out the commands in Genesis 1: “This is the account [generations, history] of the heavens and the earth when they were created.”

The Seventh Day

Creation doesn't end with the command to cultivate and care for the earth (the cultural mandate). God speaks six times on six days and then stops. He rests (ceases His work) not because He was tired, but because creation was complete. There is a time to work and a time when work is finished. God commands human beings to create just as He creates, and He commands us to rest as He rested (Exodus 31:16-17). Our work matters, but so does our resting from work. The Sabbath command reminds us that we are not indispensable to God and that we are to imitate the pattern of the Creator.

God rested on the seventh day. Creation is complete. Seven is the number of perfection. By resting on the seventh day, God blessed and sanctified it. This is foundational for the rhythm of human life and for Israel's imitation of God. He rests, and His people rest. By keeping the Sabbath, Israel expressed her unique destiny to live in harmony with the divine purpose and to witness this to the nations.

From the Dust

As we have seen, humans reflect God in a unique way. We are the only true union of the physical and the spiritual. God intended us to always be physical-spiritual hybrids and not primarily one or the other. Satan and demons and angels and God Himself are spiritual beings who can manifest themselves in the physical world (though their physicality is not essential to their nature like ours is). Animals and plants, on the other hand are physical; they don't share our soulish qualities. Only in humanity do the spiritual and material realms go together. We are made from dust, yet we have God's breath (or Spirit) in us, giving us life.

According to some other translations, God “breathed His spirit” into Adam. In Hebrew, this is fascinating wordplay. *Breath* and *spirit* share a common root, showing that the Hebrews understood that we

are spiritual as well as physical. This spiritual part of us is one of the ways we reflect God's image. We are not merely collections of atoms or purely material brains. Something irreducibly immaterial is fundamental to who we are. David put it this way in Psalm 8:3-8:

When I consider your heavens,
 the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars,
 which you have set in place,
 what is man that you are mindful of him,
 the son of man that you care for him?
 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
 and crowned him with glory and honor.
 You made him rule over the works of your hands;
 you put everything under his feet:
 all flocks and herds,
 and the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air,
 and the fish of the sea,
 all that swim the paths of the seas.

It Is Not Good for the Man to Be Alone

Genesis 1 tells the story of the creation of all things and the relationship between human beings and the world around them. Genesis 2, on the other hand, focuses on the relationship between the man and the woman and includes different but complementary details.

The man is made first. God forms him out of earth and breathes His life into him. He commands the man to work the garden and warns him not to eat the fruit from the mysterious tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Just as God had previously named the parts of creation, showing His sovereignty over it all, the man now names the animals, showing his delegated authority over the animal kingdom. God put him to sleep and creates woman because "it is not good for the man

to be alone.” This is the only thing that was not good before the fall (so far, everything has been “good” or “very good”). The woman is a suitable helper for the man and his work in the world.³

Woman is God’s special creation. Man has a created loneliness; he is made for relationship, human as well as divine. This is the first negative thing in creation before the fall: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable [or fit] for him’”(Genesis 2:18). Created loneliness is not a sign of sin. It is a divinely ordained need for companionship. This helper, who will be “fit for him,” will be a companion, a friend, one who will be equal to him and with him.

The first scientific activity occurs when Adam classifies the animals by naming them (Genesis 2:20). He has authority over them, but none of them is a helper “fit for him.” Our created loneliness is not solved in the animal kingdom. God then anaesthetizes Adam in verse 21. In a deep sleep, God takes one of his ribs, fashions a woman, and brings her to him. Notice the Hebrew parallelism in verse 23: “Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she will be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” God gives Adam a companion who is “fit for him.” This is foundational for verses 24-25. We see the relationship that God designed for us and calls us to.

This passage highlights the relational aspects of the image of God in humanity. The man and woman enjoy close and intimate relationship with each other and with God. Our capacities for relationship are central to our humanity. Being alone is still not good. We were made to need each other and to live in peace with our Creator as personal beings.

Genesis 1–2 presents God as the eternal, self-sufficient Creator of all things, but He is not distant from what He has made. We see hints of His relational nature...

when He decides to create humankind: “Let *us* make...”
(Genesis 1:26)

when He speaks directly to the man and woman (Genesis 1:28)

when He walks among the garden in search of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8)

These glimpses show us God’s intention not only to create but also to relationally interact with His creatures. God gives the first humans the privilege and responsibility of working the earth and caring for it, and He invites them into relationship with Him, their Creator and King. He created a garden for their pleasure (the Hebrew word *Eden* means “delight”) and carefully structured the rest of creation for human life. In the opening creation account we see God’s intent, design, and care for all that He has made.

At the essence of God’s creative intent for the world is the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. In the Bible, that word is usually translated “peace,” but it means much more than simply the absence of conflict. *Shalom* denotes a rich, integrated relational wholeness and unity. Cornelius Plantinga defines *shalom* this way:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight...* *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.⁴

The dimensions of *shalom* (the wholeness, peace, and harmony built into God’s creation before the fall) in human beings were focused in four directions:

Inward: They had no sin, shame, or guilt.

Outward: They were naked and unashamed.

Upward: They had intimacy with God.

Downward: They directed creation toward God-honoring ends.

One Flesh and Not Ashamed

Wholeness and unity extend not only to relationship with God but also to human relationships. Marriage language is introduced and includes sexuality (“united to his wife”) as an expression of joining the two into one. In fact, the Hebrew word translated *one* is the same word used to describe God’s oneness in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” In some mysterious way, the joining of the man and woman imitates or even reflects the unity of God.

The narrative then moves on to report the intimacy and connection that Adam and Eve share. Their closeness is pictured in their nakedness and innocence.

Genesis 1–2 presents a vision of the original goodness of God’s world. Untainted by sin, human beings live in personal relationships with God and each other. They are to cultivate the earth in a way that glorifies God and benefits them. Everything reflects His goodness and intention for it. The creation account is profound by itself, and its ramifications significantly contradict many of our modern stories, as we’ll see in the next chapter.

The God-Absented World

It is not so much what we don't know, but what we think we know that obstructs our vision.

KRISTER STENDAHL

We live in a God-absented culture. In the big story of the last two centuries of Western culture, humankind has seemed to be able to make coherent sense out of human life on earth without reference to God. Our origin, purpose, nature, and experience can now be thought of in almost exclusively materialistic and mechanistic terms. Belief in the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving Creator, though still popular, is widely considered a cultural hangover, a purely sociological phenomenon of the masses that has little basis in reality. In fact, discussions of religion, morality, and ethics are now relegated to the area of personal belief, opinion, value, or preference. Religious knowledge is generally considered an oxymoron. Whole segments of society now function without reference to God. Entertainment, education, medicine, the sciences, technology, commerce, media...all of these often function with an entirely secular backdrop.

The World with God

Into this milieu, the creation narratives of Genesis speak an incredibly subversive word. In fact, Genesis 1–2 has always been subversive of

other accounts of the world's origins. Many commentators hold that these poetic chapters (especially chapter 1) form a countercultural narrative that subverts other ancient Near East creation accounts.

The ancient Near Eastern world had many competing creation myths. The Jews were not the only people to adopt a story of the origins of the world and its people. Though Genesis 1–2 seems a bit strange to us, it was written in a cultural context significantly different from ours and served a polemical purpose: It directly contradicted the other origin stories circulating in the world.

For instance, Genesis 1 refers to the sun and moon not by their proper Hebrew names, but instead calls them “the greater light” and “the lesser light.” Bartholomew and Goheen suggest this is because many ancient Near Eastern cultures considered the sun and moon to be objects of worship. The creation story deliberately assigns them a place among the created order. God alone is to be worshipped, and the sun and moon are merely instruments He created for His purposes.¹

Similarly, the Creator God of Genesis 1–2 is nothing like the gods of the Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, who create humanity to serve them and fulfill their desires. Instead, God creates humans in His image, gives them work to do (modeled after His own work), and invites them into relationship with Him.²

The Genesis creation account reminded the Israelites, who always lived among pagan peoples, that the God who delivered them from Egypt was the same God who created the heavens and the earth. Genesis, then, presented a reality that stood in stark contrast and opposition to the other origin stories at the time.

Genesis 1–2 goes beyond this polemical function, however, to present a vision of God's grand intention and design for the world. Regardless of one's view on the relationship between the Bible and current scientific teaching, it is abundantly apparent that there is a *design* to what God has made. There is order, purpose, and intention. God's creation has an ultimate end or goal (the Greek word *telos*, which philosophers have brought into the English language, describes this). We

must understand this part of the narrative in order to appreciate the way it subverts the stories that govern twenty-first-century life.

The World Without God

As a result of the God-absented story that now dominates the Western world, many people live without any sense of telos (purpose or design). Evolutionary theory holds that the purpose for evolution is simply the survival and propagation of the species. Entertainment and media present us with a picture of life at its self-indulgent worst. If we buy into the story the news is telling, the greatest human goods are sex appeal, wealth, status, and fame. Education, once a stable purveyor of telos, has abandoned such notions and now promotes learning simply for the sake of learning. Materialism tells us that the only things that are real are the things we can see, hear, touch, taste, smell, or scientifically discover in the material world. Naturalism defines human beings as nothing more than particles and body parts—no immortal soul, no immaterial spirit, no mind beyond the neurotransmissions in our brains. We are simply the sum total of our pieces. Consumerism markets a happiness (leading to fulfillment and pleasure) based on the satisfaction of our desires. Humans were not designed with a telos in mind.

These three isms—materialism, naturalism, and consumerism—are the stories that govern Western life. They tell us who we are, where we have come from, where we are going, and what counts as a life well lived. While not officially housed under the category of religion, this all-encompassing story answers all of life's great religious questions for us. Who am I? I am an advanced mammal who will exist for a few years on this planet. Why am I here? I exist because human life evolved from simple cellular forms of life into increasingly complex arrays of particles and structures. In the absence of telos, everything goes. Nothing can be inherently better or worse than anything else. Where am I going? Wherever I want to. The future is open because medicine and technology, fueled by science, will eventually overcome every obstacle.

Atheist Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) gives an apt description of the implications of scientific naturalism:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collections of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.³

Though trumpeted as long-standing fact, these stories actually appeared on the human landscape relatively recently. Our contemporary worldview narratives are not the only way to see the world. They emerged in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are fundamentally humanistic. People came to believe that through human reason, science, and technology alone, utterly apart from God, humanity could build a perfect world.

These stories gradually led to the secularization of Western culture. Craig Gay comments on the nature of secularization:

[Secularization] is a subtle and largely inadvertent process in which religion—at least as it has traditionally been understood—forfeits its place in society. Secularization describes a process in which religious ideas, values, and institutions lose their public status and influence and eventually even their plausibility in modern societies.⁴

The cost of the gradual secularization of our dominant narratives has been high. Though in twenty-first-century America we are far better off than our parents and grandparents according to any measure, including life expectancy, quality of life, availability of health care, wealth, and leisure time, we are far less happy than they. Fewer and fewer of us experience a deep sense of well-being on a day-to-day basis.⁵ Without telos to human life, we have ceased living from and for something bigger than ourselves and instead live simply to fulfill our desire. The consequence of this vapid pursuit, according to Philip Cushman, is an “empty self.”

The empty self is filled up with consumer goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathetic therapists. . . [The empty self] experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. . . a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger.⁶

The Possibility of Something Else

Genesis 1–2 opens up the possibility of revelation from something outside the physical universe. These chapters suggest that our world must find an explanation for its existence and nature outside of its own matter, forms, and processes. If God exists and did create, our view of the world must become much bigger to accommodate the possibility of His work in the world.

If we are to believe the underlying truths of the Genesis narrative, we must admit the reality of telos in the universe. Whether we believe God used evolutionary processes or created in an instant, we can be confident that purpose, order, design, and intelligence stand behind the created world. And this telos is grounded in the creative purposes of the God we encounter in the opening pages of the Bible.

The biblical account of creation contradicts our modern myths at every point. Against materialism, Genesis 1–2 holds that the world of

particles, elements, and energy is not the only stuff of the universe. The spiritual world is also a real part of the universe even though our physical senses can only give us hints of it.

Against materialism, the creation story portrays humanity as a physical-spiritual hybrid. Created from dust, yet imbued with the very breath (or Spirit) of the living God, human beings are neither fully physical (like animals, without souls) nor fully spiritual (like angels, who lack physical bodies as an essential part of their nature). Rather, we are both physical and spiritual. We cannot be reduced to simply the physical processes in our bodies, nor are we spirits trapped in physical shells. According to the scriptures, we stand at the pinnacle of God's good creation. This is not cause for boasting, but for thanksgiving, stewardship, and responsibility.

Against consumerism, the Genesis account declares that humanity was created *for* something. We are not accidents or products of time plus blind mutation and chance. Because we are the creation of intelligence and design, we are also the creation of purpose, or telos, as we have been describing. We are meant to function in certain ways, and these ways are central to human flourishing. The opening chapters of Genesis describe not only our creation but also our telos—God's intention for us. We find our telos not in our self-governance or pleasure but in the reality of God's intentions for us.

Created for What?

The modern world frowns on the idea of telos (purpose, function, and intention). Telos implies a norm or standard against which human nature and life can be measured. And the very act of measuring (against whatever standard) is offensive to contemporary culture.

But if the creation narrative is the true story of the origins of the world, then it reveals God's intentions for human beings, offensive or not. His intentions in designing and creating us should govern our self-understandings. But so much of the creation story inescapably conflicts with the stories that govern most of twenty-first-century life.

Because God created the world, *telos* exists, and the life lived under God's good rule will be the life of true human flourishing. The good life is the life lived according to God's purposes and order. Morality is likewise only properly situated within the creation story. Right and wrong, evil and goodness make no sense according to the three isms underlying the narrative our world currently accepts. What is good turns out to be identical to whatever works toward God's purposes in creation. What is evil is whatever works against them.

Community

Human beings are impossibly relational creatures, designed to need each other. We were made in the image of a relational God, so our need for community reflects that aspect of His nature. We should not miss the significance of the statement God makes about Adam in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Imagine that! Adam had an absolutely unblemished relationship with God. He enjoyed a free-flowing exchange with his Creator that we can hardly image. And yet, even though nothing hindered his relationship with God—no sin, shame, guilt, fear, or hiding—he still was not complete. He lacked another of his own kind, so God created woman and brought her to Adam.

This highlights the pervasive human need to connect. People will use any invention—an Xbox 360 console, a personal computer, or bits and bytes of Internet data—to relate to each other. We can't help ourselves. Nor should we. But much of modern life stresses individualism (which is different from individuality)—individual rights, preferences, and obligations at the expense of more communal ways of living and seeing the world. The church is not immune. We often value a personal relationship with Jesus much more than the Bible does. Those who suggest that all we need is God are well-intentioned but incorrect. Adam had as much of God as anyone could have, yet God declared that it was not good that he was alone. We were made to need each other. Very few things can carry us joyfully through

the ups and downs of life in our fallen world, but deep and meaningful relationships can.

Male and Female

We desperately need to recapture the Genesis portrait of men and women. As we have seen in Genesis 2:18, the man and woman were sexually differentiated and unique, yet they were equal and complementary. The genuine differences between men and women, boys and girls extend far beyond their cultural socialization. The difference is one of nature, not just nurture. We were created for each other, sharing equally in the culture-making mandate of Genesis 1–2. We are to be joined in ways that reflect and even participate in the unity of God. And most importantly, both man and woman are needed to fully reflect the image of God. Certainly, masculinity or femininity alone partially mirrors God’s image, but only together do they fully represent Him.

Men and women are equally made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). They share equally in God’s blessing, both in their sexuality and creativity and assignment to fill the earth (1:28). Men and women are also equally empowered to have dominion over the created order. Made in the image of God, they are a sign on this planet that this is God’s domain and that they serve as vice-regents in His kingdom.

Marriage and Sexuality

Christian marriage finds its basis in Genesis 1–2. To be united, man and woman must first leave father and mother, breaking the old family structure. Their union is to be permanent, not situational or occasional. Second, they are to cleave to each other. The verb is very strong—“united to, laminated together, glued together.” Their cleaving is heterosexual; they form a new family unit. Third, they are to become one flesh. Their union is monogamous.

What is this life that man and woman are to live together, naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25)? They are utterly transparent before

each other—no separation. Loneliness is gone. All of this is the intention of the sixth day of creation. God makes us in His image, breathes into us the breath of life, and gives us dominion over the earth. We tend the garden and name the animals. He gives us companionship in the “one flesh” of sexual, permanent, and personal union. There is no warfare between the sexes; they are naked and unashamed.

We were created to reproduce, and fortunately for us, God decided to make that a really enjoyable process. Think about the implications of being naked and unashamed. Adam and Eve had no concept of any other reality than nakedness. And their nakedness simply described their level of intimacy. No shame, no guilt, no barriers, no insecurity, no comparison, no competition. Nothing but joy, delight, intimacy. Why this is so important? It’s important because they were sexual before they were sinful. In other words, that part of us that is sexual, including arousal, passion, and release, was part of God’s good creation. Our sexuality has been tainted by sin, but being sexual is still a good thing.

The church usually announces precisely the opposite to the world. Sex is bad, shameful, a taboo topic for discussion within the community of followers of Jesus except to remind us to stay away from it. In Genesis 1–2, being sexual is a part of being human, and being human is good. Therefore, being sexual is also good. Far too many of us look at our sexuality as a curse rather than the good gift of a gracious God. God is the author of sex. This isn’t the enemy’s territory—this is something God ordained for us to enjoy and to knit the hearts and bodies of two people together. This may seem obvious to some of us, but to many others, this is revolutionary and liberating. The point is that sexuality is a wonderful and awesome thing. Our sexuality is woven into the very fabric of our humanness. The church would do well to recognize that whatever we say about sexual ethics to our world must begin with this resounding declaration: *It is good!*

Yet that declaration is tempered in the very first pages of the Bible by the warning of its power. As much as our culture insists otherwise,

sexuality isn't simply a function of our body parts. In no other way are two people bonded into one flesh. Deeper than the mere joining of genitals, sex involves the whole person and is the truest joining of bodies, hearts, and souls. The prohibition of sexual activity outside of marriage is based on this profound insight: Intercourse creates this mysterious one-flesh union.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for intercourse is *to know*. Sex gives us a special kind of knowledge and a new kind of intimacy called “one flesh.” Sexuality comes from places deep within us and is the only way we can unite our lives with another. The encounter does something, for better or worse, that cannot be undone. Sex outside of marriage violates the nature of the act itself—it is a life-uniting act without life-uniting commitment. Such sin is not irreversible, but it requires the healing touch of God.

Nothing else that can happen between two human beings has this effect. In no other way can two people experience this kind of oneness. God's gift of sex is good, but it is also powerful. It can be a source of great joy and meaning or a source of great shame and harm. We see that the only thing strong enough to handle its power is marriage: one man, one woman in permanent, monogamous, covenantal relationship.

Sacred and Secular

The opening chapters of Genesis take great pains to distinguish between the Creator and the creation. The two are fundamentally distinct. God is independent, and everything else depends on Him. God is timeless, and the universe began at a moment in time. The created order may declare God's excellence, and as human beings we may reflect God's image, but nothing that has been created is divine.

There is no hint in the creation accounts of a distinction between what is sacred (or religious) and what is secular (or common or not religious). Adam and Eve were invited to be caretakers of the world, ruling *coram deo* (in God's presence). *Culture* is the name we give to organized activities within society, such as making music, government,

businesses, and houses. Genesis 1:26-28 is often described as the cultural mandate because human beings are commanded to exercise wise and responsible stewardship over God's world. This means we are to direct creation toward God-honoring ends. It includes exploring and developing what can be achieved in architecture, farming, art, and family life. God has always intended that we should be involved in this kind of work. What we do in this life matters to God; it is not merely training for the life to come.

In Job 38–41, God declares His delight in what He has made. All of creation was designed to declare His excellence. Psalm 24:1 states, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it." Creation isn't just about humanity—God's enjoyment of His creation extends to the nonhuman parts as well. The story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration isn't only a human story; it is also the story of the rest of the world. For instance, in Genesis 9, God makes the rainbow covenant with Noah and every living creature. The biblical drama that starts with creation and ends in *shalom* includes, at each stage, wolves and lambs and all else God has made.

Paul warns about some first-century people who argued against enjoying creation:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:1-5).

Creation, even after the fall, is still good. We know this. But beyond knowing it, we must consider its implications. Because we are spiritual

beings, we engage in spiritual activities. And here's the point: Human activities are spiritual activities. Eating, drinking, mowing the yard, watching a movie...all of this and more is spiritual because it involves human beings, who are spiritual.

The Value of Human Life

God has ordered His creation. Regardless of the time frame, divine order and the divine purpose stand behind everything. We are not the product of random evolutionary process. Humankind is God's special creation. We have been made in His image. The dignity of our being and identity are grounded in scripture. You will find this nowhere else.

The creation belongs to the Creator, not to us. The days of creation come to a climax in our creation in God's image to reflect His character and do His will on this earth. Every person on the planet today has been made for this same destiny. God has a plan for His universe, this planet, and us, and we are made to participate in it. Our dignity and our destiny are grounded in creation. God gave us the bodies we have. He breathed His life into us, and we live for His purposes. This earth is the arena where we are to live this out. He made it, ordered it, saw that it was good, and blessed it.

Genesis gives us a powerful affirmation of creation, value, meaning, and destiny. This is foundational for our faith. It is foundational to who we are. If this is built into us, it can overcome the tremendous sense of alienation, dislocation, brokenness, fear, and despair that is rampant in our world today. The Bible counters the lies we have believed. Our lives have God-given dignity and meaning and a destiny that includes everything about us. The one who made us and designed us knows what is best for us. If we violate the order of creation, we not only violate the will of God but also step into self-destructive patterns. God not only creates, orders, designs, and purposes this created world but also places us here as part of His creation, with a destiny to live according to and participate in His purposes. God's moral will applies to us.

The creation narrative informs concepts like social justice, mercy, and compassion. With no God and therefore no absolute truth and no transcendent morality, on what basis could we defend the idea of human dignity? The lesson of nature, interpreted through a Darwinian lens, seems to be that the most valuable are the strongest, most cunning, and most worthy of respect. If you want to be treated with human dignity, you must demonstrate that you deserve it. Why should bigotry be wrong if nature values only the beings that prove themselves through strength and cunning?

Ethicist Peter Singer takes the logical implications of a Darwinian worldview to their logical conclusions:

I have argued that the life of a fetus is of no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, etc., and that since no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person. Now it must be admitted that these arguments apply to the newborn baby as much as to the fetus. . . . If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.⁷

But here again Genesis paints a subversive picture. From conception, *all* humans are created in God's image. The image of God in humanity is *human as human* (essentially), not merely some element in him or her or a particular manifestation of the image (functionally). Humans *reflect* the image of God in differing degrees and ways, but no one is *created* in the image of God in greater or lesser degrees. Although distorted after the fall, humanity remains created in the image of God (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). This means that the disabled, the mentally challenged, the elderly, the very young—all whom our society would devalue—are to be nurtured, protected, and fought

for. The worth of humans runs far deeper than their ability to function or contribute.

The biblical accounts subvert the narratives of our world in every way possible. From the way we see our world to the way we see ourselves and our relationships with each other, every facet of human existence fits together in God's good design.