

GOD'S STORY

The Bible is far more than a compilation of true stories about people and nations existing long ago. The Bible itself is one amazing story. It's the story God is telling about himself and the people and world he created. It's not only a story of history, it's a story about what he's doing today and what he expects of every person on earth, in general, and all those who call themselves Christians, in particular. Without understanding this larger story of his incredible love for the world and his plans to bring peace on earth once again, the small stories don't always make much sense.

The Bible, made up of 66 books written by men but inspired by God, can be overwhelming to people investigating Christianity. To get a better feel for this grand story, or the meta-narrative of the Bible, I've summarized the Bible in less than 2,000 words—a kind of *Cliff's Notes* of the Bible. Even though I had to leave out massive portions of this incredible book, I hope you'll get a feel for the heart of God and the love of God for humans who he uniquely created in his image.

Finally, I hope you'll see yourself in this story. Whether you're searching for God or trying to find your way back to him, God desperately wants you to be part of his story and his life—forever.

Please just sit back and enjoy the story of God.

The Meta-Narrative (The Grand Story) of the Bible

- 1** The very first sentence of the Bible is the bold declaration, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. The Bible and the story of the Christian worldview begins with God and creation. God created the universe, our world, plants, animals, and mankind from nothing. He also created the physical laws of nature and moral laws of society/relationships to make everything work in harmony. He gave humans the capacity for meaningful work and the ability for rational and moral thought, like himself. Because he created all humans, we belong to him and he has the moral authority to expect us to fulfill certain responsibilities on earth and to determine how we ought to relate to him and each other. God has a purpose and plan for all things.
- 2** Of course, God pre-existed creation. He is the perfect, eternal, loving, and sovereign ruler over everything. The opening scenes of the Bible show Adam and Eve enjoying intimacy with God and each other, and God giving humans responsibility for caring for his creation. God was in his glory and he declared all creation good. The kingdom of God was alive and well on planet earth.

- 3 But something went terribly wrong. Satan, an angel who rebelled against God prior to creation, tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. Ever since “the fall”, every person except Jesus has been born with a sin nature predisposed to distrust God and others and constantly trying to live independent of both. Some of the consequences of sin are death, broken relationships, selfish behavior, fear and lack of purpose, but most importantly, our relationship with God is broken. Sin traps people and destroys dreams. But sin’s effects are not limited to mankind and society. Animals, plants and the earth itself have been affected.
- 4 Satan himself has a kingdom, what the Bible refers to as “the world”. Satan is the champion of disobedience—tempting and deceiving humans to continually ignore God. As a result, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world are sworn enemies. Those in God’s kingdom are committed to loving God and caring for other people and his world. Those in Satan’s kingdom are committed to self-fulfillment and autonomy from their creator; they have other gods and allegiances. It is not other religions, philosophies, or even non-Christians who are the enemy. The enemy is Satan and the self-deceptive power of sin in each of us.
- 5 But all is not lost. Right in the Garden of Eden God initiated his plan to redeem... rescue his world. Central to that plan was the sending of a Messiah, or Savior. However, God’s redemption plan did not lay dormant until Jesus came, nor was God content to simply redeem mankind spiritually. God’s passion was that his original intentions for mankind and his world be restored. Love, justice, and *shalom*, or God’s peace, would again be the norm (albeit imperfect until Jesus returns again). *Shalom* is the wholeness or deep contentment achieved when all things are working in harmony as God intended. God’s expectation is that every person who claims to love him be his agent or ambassador, working to reverse the effects of the fall.
- 6 Therefore, right in Genesis, God made a covenant or promise with Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel (Jewish people). If Abraham trusted God alone, God would lead him to a new land and make his descendants a great nation. All the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.
- 7 Six hundred years later, after God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, God created the first theocracy—Israel—a nation led by God. God, speaking through Moses, wrote their laws and told them where they were to go and how they were to live. God was their literal king. He instructed them to begin offering ceremonial sacrifices for their sins, looking forward to the day when he would provide the one final sacrifice he would ever require. He also made a new covenant with Israel. If Israel would serve him alone and live according to the ceremonial and moral laws he gave them, he would give them the land he promised Abraham and make them a showcase of prosperity, peace, and blessing. Other nations would see the greatness of God and they, too, would choose to love and honor him, thereby expanding God’s kingdom on earth.
- 8 Unfortunately Israel did not live up to their end of the bargain. They rejected God as their King and asked for a human king like other countries. Whenever those kings and Israel obeyed God, they prospered. However as soon as they prospered, they began worshiping other gods and disobeying God’s moral laws, disregarding the poor and embarrassing God. When God punished them, they repented and started living like the people of God again, only to repeat the cycle over and over.

- 9** God sent prophets to Israel to remind them of the dream and promise of the Kingdom of God on earth where God's will would be done as it is in heaven, and the earth would again experience the peace and prosperity of God. Isaiah and the other prophets looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the ushering of a new era with a New Testament or promise.
- 10** Jesus, the Son of God, was (and is) the promised Messiah—The Christ. He came to earth as our rescuer and messenger from God to explain the new covenant from God and to personally fulfill it. Peace with God was no longer based on our obedience to the sacrificial or ceremonial laws given to Moses, but on Christ's sacrifice alone. The Father God made it possible that by Christ's death and resurrection, any person who truly has faith that Jesus is the Son of God, believes his teachings, and repents or turns away from his or her old sinful habits, will be forgiven of all their sins. This is spiritual redemption... a free gift of God through Jesus Christ the Bible calls grace. Like the waiting father in the parable of the prodigal son, God welcomes us back with open arms from our rebellious journey. The Bible tells us that heaven has a party whenever that happens.
- 11** But, that's not all! We don't wake up the morning after the party essentially the same person, except forgiven. Heaven's no! We are born again by the Holy Spirit of God, given brand new spiritual DNA, and actually become the spiritual children of God. The Holy Spirit's primary ministries are to remind us of the things Jesus taught and empower us and the church (all believers, everywhere) with spiritual gifts which enable us to serve more effectively. The Holy Spirit also causes believers to exhibit what the Bible calls the Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control).
- 12** The other reason Jesus came to earth was to call all who would follow Him, to join a conspiracy of the faithful—a new community of world changers—the kingdom of God on earth! “May your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The gospel or “good news” declared by Jesus was as much about a radical call to social and economic justice, mercy, and love as it was about salvation and heaven. Jesus made it clear that every true believer has been given a “sub-kingdom”, or responsibilities while on earth to be part of the redemptive purposes of God. In effect, Jesus invites us to join the family business! We weren't saved just so we could go to heaven someday. Salvation's purpose was and still is to create an army of people sold out to God, doing the will of God, for the glory and pleasure of God—in *this life and the next!*
- 13** The early church took this seriously. We read in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts that immediately upon responding to the gospel, people began to love God with wholehearted devotion. They took to heart Jesus' command to love others as much as they loved themselves. The early church was so radical in their love and lifestyle, that within a few centuries millions of people became followers of Jesus. The Kingdom of God spread like wild fire! They didn't set out to change the culture around them; they simply followed Jesus' commands and the people around them found this radical love irresistible. Christ, through his church (followers), was again redeeming or taking back that which had been lost in the fall of man.
- 14** Unfortunately, within a few more centuries this devotion to living out the teachings of Jesus degenerated into religious ritual and inexcusable behavior by the church. Still, in every generation, God preserved a remnant of men and women who loved Jesus more than

anything on earth. Today, regardless of the hypocrisy and outright sin in many who call themselves Christians (including this author), Jesus' teachings are still true, and when lived out, are a testimony to their truth.

- 15** Our mission in life is to love God by loving and unselfishly serving the people he has placed in our lives. In fact, love is the litmus test of our faith. Jesus is our teacher and example for our message, motives, and methods. He expects his followers to do just that—follow his example. Those who do are his true followers. Those who don't, aren't, regardless of what they say they "believe" about Jesus or the Bible.
- 16** Followers of Jesus look forward with great hope and expectation to the day when Jesus will come again for his people and usher in the final stage of the Kingdom. All that is wrong with this present earth will be destroyed. When he does return, all who did not follow Jesus in this life will be separated from God and God's people forever. Those who truly believed and followed Jesus will be rewarded based on how well they served Jesus by loving the people and using the resources entrusted to them. They will then live with Jesus in a new heaven and new earth forever. The redemption of the world will then be complete and *Shalom*, God's peace, will rest on everything, forever.

All this and more is written in the Bible, which is God's message to mankind. It is the ultimate authority for faith and life for all true followers of Jesus.

Please note: The information in paragraph 14 does not appear in the Bible. It's my commentary on the church centuries after the biblical account.

Now what?

If you want to get to the heart of what it means to be loved by God, I encourage you to get a good study Bible in modern English, such as the NIV or Life Application Study Bible, and begin by reading the Book of Luke. Before you read, begin with this prayer, "God, if you're really there, teach me about yourself and please make yourself known to me. Thank you." Then read and begin obeying Jesus—do exactly as he says and see if the reality of the love of God invades your life.

How you can become a child of God and follower of Jesus

When Christ died on the cross, he paid the price God required for sin—which we call the atonement or the transaction. This gift of salvation is available to anyone, regardless of how terrible their sins. This isn't a matter of you needing to clean up your act before you come to Jesus. Jesus desperately longs to forgive anyone who is sick about their sin and desires to love and live for God.

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
(1 John 1:8–9)

However, even though the Bible says that Jesus died for the sins of the world, unless a person personally and individually accepts God's gift, Christ's sacrifice does them little good. So then, what does it mean to accept the gift, or to "accept Christ?"

Generally, acceptance begins with a small, but growing confidence that Jesus Christ is exactly who he says he is in the Bible, the Son of God, and that he loves you. His teachings begin to feel too compelling and true to be denied any longer. There's also often a growing realization that without Jesus,

you're incomplete, unforgiven, and somehow missing out on the adventure of living a more purposeful life.

Ultimately, you'll have to speak to Jesus directly and tell him yourself how sorry you are for the sin in your life and ask him to forgive you. No pastor or priest can do that for you. This is between Christ and you. Just talk out loud and tell him how you feel. Don't worry about getting all the words just right. Just speak to him from your heart. Tell him you're willing to pledge your life and allegiance to him forever and thank him for forgiving you.

"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (Romans 10:9–10)

When you confess and believe with absolute sincerity, the Bible says you are born again. Being born again means our old sinful spirit, which was "dead to sin" (Rom. 6:11), is transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit—the transformation. Spiritually, we are brand new people—we are God's spiritual children possessing his spiritual DNA.

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12–13)

Our new righteousness is an alien righteousness because it comes from outside of ourselves—it is Christ's gift to all who truly believe. The first evidence of this new life is often an overwhelming disgust with sin in our life, a desire to do better, to be more Christ-like, accompanied by the surprise of an incredible peace, because all is now right between the Father and ourselves. You now belong to God and to a community of lovers of God—the church.

So, I'd encourage you to find a Christian you admire and tell them what's going on in your life and ask them to help you. I'd also suggest the following books to help you better understand what the life of a follower of Jesus looks like in real life.

The Epic, by John Eldridge

Engaging God's World, Cornelius Plantinga

Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren

In addition, some wonderfully gifted people have put together a powerful 10-week course on basic Christianity called the Alpha Course. It's offered free in thousands of churches every year. You can find one near you and get more information by going to www.alphausa.org.

Finally, you may also want to check out a great website www.monvee.com. They have an amazing state-of-the-art, interactive program to introduce you to the basics of the Christian faith right at home.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8–9)

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