

THE GPS GUIDE TO

THE BIBLE'S BIG STORY



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CHAPTER 1

CREATION: A GOOD WORLD BEGINS

The Genesis stories of the creation of our world (Genesis 1:1-2:3, 2:4-3:24) provide a picture of how God desires the world to be. These archetypal stories say that when God created the world and all that it is in it, God created it to be whole, complete and in harmony. It was full of peace. God created the earth entirely good, and gave humans a vital role to play within creation.

Genesis said the creator God placed humans in a garden called Eden. Adam and Eve represented humanity, made in the image of God as the culmination of God's good creation. Symbolically, the name Adam meant "humankind" and Eve meant "living" or "life giver." This was the Bible story's first garden.

Life for those first humans in God's garden was full of purpose. Humans, Genesis said, were created to "subdue" and "rule over" God's creation. To subdue and rule over the earth meant humans were to take care of it. God was allowing and empowering humans to play a vital part in making sure that the world remained good or whole, as God intended it to be. To subdue and rule over the earth was not to abuse or take

advantage of creation, but rather to thoughtfully, carefully and gently steward all that God had made, to be the image of God to the whole world. It was to live out the purpose for which humans were created. Carrying out this God-given purpose was what Genesis meant when it spoke of humans being made “in the image of God.”

Not many places in the Middle East were filled with trees, but Genesis said that first garden was. (The word “paradise” comes from a Persian word describing the gardens kings planted for their own enjoyment.) Trees were not just beautiful—they produced fruit and sustained life. Genesis 2 named two trees in particular, trees full of archetypal meaning—the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With a whole garden available, God instructed the humans to avoid just the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They already knew good, so all that tree could give them was knowledge of evil. With God’s blessing, humans were to live in the garden of Eden and take care of it, free from the knowledge of evil. Humans shared a relationship with God, self, others and the world marked by peace, wholeness and love—the essence of a “very good” creation.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- The peoples who lived around Israel also told creation stories. In their stories, however, the world started with battles of various kinds between gods. (In fact, the world was often said to have been formed from the corpse of whichever being was thought to have lost the battle.) How does it shape your approach to life’s meaning and purpose to believe, as Genesis taught, that the world was created by a good God, rather than as a result of conflict and violence?

- In the last 100 years, many people have come to believe that our world, and our lives, are complete happenstance, a random occurrence with no source or purpose. (This is often attributed to “science,” but science only provides evidence for a “big bang.” Statements beyond that are faith statements, not provable by scientific methods.) What difference can it make to your day-to-day life to believe that this world, and your life, have a God-given purpose, and are not simply a pointless coincidence?

CHAPTER 2

MORAL FREEDOM MISUSED: BROKENNESS BEGINS

The Genesis writers (and all the Bible writers after them) believed God's divine nature is complete, holy love. One aspect of this holy love was that God created humans with the freedom to love God or not, because love is not love unless it is given freely. So along with the potential of love came the possibility that humans would choose not to love God. God gave humans a will free to make real choices with real consequences.

Genesis 3 told the heart-breaking next chapter of the story in archetypal images that are almost universally recognizable. It's very unlikely that snakes could ever talk, but how clearly we recognize the idea of a voice whispering to us, "Did God really say?" Genesis said humans became convinced that God did not actually have their best interests at heart. They chose to rebel, to eat from the tree God asked them not to eat from, and thus to make themselves aware of evil as well as of good.

When humans chose to rebel against God, to claim, in effect, that they could live as "god" over their own lives, the world was no longer whole, but broken. Humans now found themselves

making choices that resulted in darkness, brokenness and sin. Human hearts were dislocated, separated from God's. After opening their minds and hearts to the presence of evil, Genesis said, the humans felt shame. They felt vulnerable and afraid, and tried to hide their sin and themselves from the loving God who had created them. Jealousy, hatred and violence soon followed—in Genesis 4, Cain murdered his brother Abel.

But another key Biblical theme began in the Genesis 3 story. Even as humans distrusted God by rebelling against the divine direction for a good life, God didn't write them off, but came seeking them. Again, the Genesis story reflected realities we instantly recognize. When God asked why they were hiding, the humans' response was filled with blame (itself another sign of brokenness). First they blamed one another, then the serpent, then God for giving them the freedom to choose. This response echoes all the way to today—we still yield to our inner tendency to live for self, to try to be our own "god." And we still blame others and God for our mistakes and bad choices. The storytellers, writers and editors of Genesis knew that people often want to blame God for allowing evil, sin and death. But, they said, those sad realities sprang from humans' misuse of their God-given moral freedom. God wanted this world to be a paradise marked by holiness and righteousness, not brokenness and injustice.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- Can you think of times when you've heard the voice of what Scholar Lesslie Newbigin called "that little snake of suspicion"* in your mind? In what areas have you wondered if God's way of life really is the best way for you to live? What experiences have you had, or seen people close to you have, that have tended to confirm the goodness of God's principles for life?

- Genesis 3:9 pictured God walking through the garden, calling “Where are you?” to his hiding children. In what ways, in history and supremely in Jesus, does that story capture how God has related to wandering humans throughout the Bible’s big story? Have there been times in your life when God has found you while you were hiding or trying to ignore God?

* Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible*. Kansas City: Barefoot Ministries, 2011 edition, p. 17.

CHAPTER 3

A PEOPLE OF PROMISE

At the start of Genesis 12, the Bible’s narrative moves from a section many scholars would identify as “pre-history”—archetypal stories that set the stage for the rest of the story—to a record of history, stories about people in identifiable times and places. As this narrative begins, we get a sense of the massive scope of God’s plan for redemption. Beginning at Genesis 12, these stories show us God’s heart for righting the wrongs of the world and restoring the world to its intended wholeness. They also honestly reveal the struggles of human beings to live into the purpose for which they were created.

Beginning with the patriarch Abraham, God set out to work out God’s redemptive plan through a particular people, Abraham’s descendants. Their calling was not a self-centered one, as some people suppose. Genesis 12:3 clearly laid out God’s intentions, as God told Abraham, “all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.”

Abraham’s grandson Jacob gave the people its most characteristic name. In Genesis 32:8, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, and

the nation who descended from him were most often called the Israelites. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob received remarkable promises—but they did not find many of those promises fulfilled in their lifetimes (cf. Hebrews 11:13-16). They modeled faith in their (and our) eternal God, and lived their lives in faith in God's eternal dependability.

The Israelites moved to Egypt to escape a famine. (Jacob's favorite son Joseph, who had eventually risen to great influence in Egypt, played a big role in saving his family.) A friendly Pharaoh gave them good land on which to live, and the Israelites prospered and multiplied. But generations later a fearful, tyrannical Egyptian king enslaved them, forcing them to work on many of his massive building projects. The people suffered greatly through decades as slaves. Finally, God called the great leader Moses to go to Egypt with the message to the Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Scholars do not agree on whether all the plagues that came on Egypt were natural events that God used, or divine interventions that went beyond the laws of nature. What is clear is that, against every stubborn instinct of his heart, the leader of mighty Egypt finally sent the slaves out to freedom. Those decisive events, known as the Exodus, became Israel's defining story, still remembered every year around the world at Passover celebrations.

Leading this group of former slaves through the wilderness, Moses began a process, continued by generations of later teachers, of recording laws to instruct the people about how to respond in practical ways to God's desire for wholeness. Their sacrificial system, though it was too often misunderstood and misused, gave them a vivid symbolic acting out of God's plan to forgive people and restore them to wholeness. When Israel lived most fully into God's calling, they were indeed a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

Moses led the people to the borders of their Promised Land. The book of Numbers told the story, however, of a crisis of faith that led the people to refuse to go into the land—they even talked wildly about killing Moses, and going back to Egypt! As a result, they spent a generation in the wilderness. Deuteronomy recorded Moses' final instructions to the people, identified Joshua as Moses' successor, and told of Moses' death after God gave him a view of the Promised Land from the heights of Mount Nebo.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- The Israelites believed that God's power had freed them from slavery to their world's most powerful king—yet they later doubted God's power, and some of them spoke nostalgically of returning to the "security" of their slave lives in Egypt. How does their story speak to your life experiences? When have you been able to trust God's promises even in the face of challenging circumstances?
- God told Abraham, as a promise and a challenge, "All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you." Centuries later, the apostle Paul wrote, "If you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). In what ways have you seen followers of Christ fall short of being a blessing to "all the families of the earth"? How can you, in your own actions and through your influence on others, help that mission to become reality?

CHAPTER 4

KINGS, POETS AND PROPHETS

The books of Joshua and Judges showed (in sometimes different ways) how the Israelite people who had left Egypt arrived at the Promised Land of Canaan, and gradually took possession of much of it. Parts of their story seem to reflect the Israelites' understanding of God's commands, influenced by their times when many people believed in violent, nationalistic gods, but do not fit with Jesus' teaching about loving our enemies and extending forgiveness even to those who wrong us. The stories also reported honestly the Israelites' struggles to follow their God faithfully, as they kept being drawn to the worship practices of the peoples around them.

Finally the people went to Samuel (their prophet and leader) and demanded a king. He warned them of the potential downsides, but anointed Saul as their first king. After Saul proved unable to keep faith with God in his rule, Samuel also anointed David, a young shepherd boy, to become Saul's successor. David proved to be an outstanding king, whose leadership unified the twelve tribes as fully as they ever were. (Even today, the flag of Israel carries the star of

David.) David's son Solomon also had a long rule, during which he built a majestic Temple to God in Jerusalem. But the later part of Solomon's rule was marked by high taxes, periods of forced labor and increasing restlessness among the people.

After Solomon's death, the 10 northern tribes demanded changes. When Rehoboam, the new king, rebuffed their demands, they separated and set up their own kings, while the two southern tribes tried to maintain the Davidic monarchy. The northern kingdom, whose territory did not include the Temple in Jerusalem, wandered away from their allegiance to God, and the Assyrian Empire destroyed it and hopelessly scattered its people in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom alternated periods of apostasy and faithfulness, but eventually succumbed to the Babylonian Empire, and most of its people went into exile in Babylon in 586 B.C.

Unlike many other nations, even the worst of Israel's kings never had things entirely their own way. God sent prophets to speak truth to power, to seek to guide the nation of Israel in living faithfully as a blessing to others. These prophets warned God's people to rid themselves of idolatry and injustice. In order for God's purpose—the Kingdom of God—to come true in our world, God's chosen people must make God first in their lives. The people of Israel needed to be committed to taking care of the people around the world who needed help, to justice of all kinds.

Yet prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos also promised that God will never abandon God's people. Regardless of how far we may drift from God's presence and God's purpose, God will not forget us. Probably the last prophet to write in the Old Testament, Malachi, pledged in Malachi 3:1-2, "Suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,

says the Lord of heavenly forces.” Faithful people in Israel waited longingly for that promise to come true.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- Even during the time when Israel was unified under the monarchy, one of their hymns said, “Kings aren’t saved by the strength of their armies; warriors aren’t rescued by how much power they have. A warhorse is a bad bet for victory; it can’t save despite its great strength....We put our hope in the LORD” (Psalm 33:16-17, 20). In what ways are we still tempted to put our trust in human rulers and military power? What can Israel’s history teach us about the importance of placing our ultimate trust in God?
- Professor Bernhard Anderson wrote, “In all ancient history there was nothing else that matched the succession of prophets who arose in Israel.”* What made the role of the prophets so important spiritually, even when their contemporaries rejected their messages challenging wicked practices? Do you believe a similar role is part of God’s calling to your church today? To you as an individual believer?

* Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, p. 41.

CHAPTER 5 GOD CAME—IN PERSON

It was about 300-400 years before Malachi’s prophetic promise came true. God had watched, worked, and spoken to humans throughout time—and still, too often, humans didn’t quite understand or live out God’s purposes. So, in a climactic act of self-giving and revelation, God came in person. But God did this in a startling, unexpected way. Instead of striding onto the world stage like an all-conquering superhero, God entered our world as an infant supernaturally conceived by a poor peasant girl named Mary. Mary and her husband Joseph protected and raised him as a child. As the gospel of John put it, God had put on flesh and lived alongside humans in the midst of our struggles (cf. John 1:14). God was no longer alien in any way to the difficulties of the human condition, because Jesus experienced it. People no longer had to guess what God was up to in the world, because Jesus embodied the reign of God. Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, humans and God were mutually revealed to one another in a direct, never-before-seen way.

Jesus not only came to die for humans, he came to show us how to live. God had always longed for a perfect, loving relationship.

Human after human failed to love God perfectly. Jesus broke that pattern and set a new pattern by living in perfect, loving union with God. Jesus' life was about reversing the primal human rebellion, the sin of Adam and Eve, and showing that humans can live into the image for which God created them. Jesus lived as a beacon of light in a dark world reminding humans that God has not forgotten them.

Ironically, the way Jesus lived was the main reason his enemies wanted to kill him. Jesus entered human history at a time when the people of Israel desperately wanted a King again. The Jewish people were tired of being oppressed by Kings and Empires and wanted the ruler God had promised them. Jesus was that promised King. However, the Jewish people, especially the religious leaders, didn't want a King who was poor, homeless and lived to serve others. They wanted a King who would overthrow the Roman Empire, and make them the world's dominant power. Jesus was not that kind of King. Jesus was a man of peace instead of violence. Instead of oppressive power, Jesus led with humility. Instead of only keeping company with the rich and prestigious, Jesus often sought out the marginalized, oppressed, lonely and forgotten. Instead of organizing people for his own good, Jesus organized a movement of people (called the disciples) around God's Kingdom dream—to restore the world toward its intended wholeness.

Jesus taught that the people who love him, who experience his salvation, will share the gospel by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing those who have no clothes and visiting prisoners in jail. Jesus wanted to be the King of people's hearts and lives, not a King of possessions, position and prestige.

For God's Kingdom dream to be fulfilled in them, the people of Israel needed to find their way back to God again. Jesus wanted to be the way for Israel to find their way back to God. Sadly, too many couldn't believe that the way to God was the way of

humility and service, not violence and power. So the people who Jesus came to serve turned on him and demanded he be killed.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- Jesus told captivating, thought-provoking stories we call parables (cf. Matthew 13). Jesus loved and welcomed little children, and they appear to have loved him back (cf. Mark 10:13-16). Jesus healed many who were sick, physically and spiritually (cf. Mark 1:32-34). Jesus loved and forgave sinners (cf. Luke 19:1-10). What aspect of Jesus' life and message touches your heart the most? In what ways would you most like to be like him?
- Jesus also bluntly challenged hypocrisy and pretense, especially among religious leaders (cf. Matthew 23:27-28). He perplexed and pained his forerunner John the Baptist by not forcefully freeing him from prison and eventual execution (cf. Luke 7:18-23). He said things about wealth that seemed to many to defy common sense (cf. Luke 16:10-14). He so infuriated the religious leaders by claiming oneness with God that they tried to kill him (cf. John 10:27-33). He told his followers plainly that they'd face troubles in this world (cf. John 16:33). Which aspects of following Jesus do you find most challenging?

CHAPTER 6

GOD FACED THE WORST FOR US—AND TRIUMPHED

All four gospels devote roughly one-third of their total space to the one week of Jesus' life that began on what we now call Palm Sunday, and that ended with Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion by his enemies, and his resurrection from the dead two days later.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a colt, an Israelite symbol of a king coming in peace (cf. Zechariah 9:9). Infuriated by the sight of a corrupt trade ripping off Passover pilgrims, he overturned the highly profitable tables of Temple money-changers. During the next three days, he taught each day in the Temple, often fielding questions from his enemies designed to trip him up and alienate the common people who followed him. On Thursday, he celebrated the Passover *seder* with his disciples, and gave it a new, "Lord's Supper" meaning to mark his self-giving to redeem the world. He was arrested and tried in the darkness of that Thursday night, even though Jewish law required daylight trials to avoid seeing defendants railroaded without public scrutiny. After trying to free this man

who obviously posed no military threat, on Friday morning the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate reluctantly yielded to pressure from the religious leaders and ordered Jesus crucified.

Jesus' followers were devastated when he died on the cross; it seemed to end all their hopes, and show that they had just followed another fallible mortal. But very early Sunday morning, his devoted followers Mary Magdalene, Peter and John found his tomb empty. Their perplexity gave way to astonished joy as Jesus, mysteriously transformed yet clearly fully alive, appeared to them in various settings and gave them the mission of carrying on his work after he left the earth. That sequence of events was central and decisive in God's mission to redeem the broken world. When Jesus rose from the dead, God's eventual final victory over evil was assured.

The gospel of John, which echoed Genesis by starting with the words "In the beginning," used the symbolism of a garden to underline Jesus mission to redeem and restore the brokenness that blighted human life. John 18:1 said Jesus and his disciples went to pray in a garden just before he was arrested. John 19:41 said there was a garden where he was crucified and buried. After he rose from the dead, John 20:15 said that Mary of Magdala initially mistook him for the gardener. And in John 20:22, as Jesus commissioned his disciples to carry on his mission on earth, he "breathed on them," in a clear echo of God breathing the breath of life into human nostrils in Genesis 2. The second garden in the Bible's big story is the garden of the cross and resurrection.

Jesus' death on the cross and his victorious resurrection over death opened the door for people from all nations to share in the power of love, hope, peace and reconciliation. Even in what appear to be the most irredeemable situations and circumstances, such as violence, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus offer the Good News that we can participate with God to restore

the world toward its intended wholeness. During his ministry, before his death, burial and resurrection, Jesus taught his disciples to pray like this: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. [For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]’” (Matthew 6:9-13)

This prayer shapes the way we view God’s Kingdom as Christians. When we pray that prayer we are asking God to use us to make God’s Kingdom dream for all of creation a reality. God is using us to make the world right. When we pray “thy kingdom come” we are surrendering ourselves to Jesus as the King of our life and promising God, ourselves and others that we will live as though Jesus is King. The phrase “on earth as it is in heaven” simply means that God wants us to live in a way that transforms the world from a place of brokenness to a place of wholeness. “On earth as it is in heaven” means that life on earth will become more like heaven—that it will be marked by peace, righteousness and justice. Jesus’ resurrection reveals that Jesus defeated death and sin, that life, love and hope will have the final word. For Christians, death has lost its sting and God’s Kingdom life defines our future.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- There is a profound, divine mystery about exactly how Jesus’ death and resurrection opened salvation to all humanity. Many one-dimensional explanations have been offered; most have some element of truth, but none of them fully explains how it works. C. S. Lewis, in his fantasy book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, may have captured it best when Aslan the Lion (his Christ figure) said it was “a magic

deeper still” than any that evil knew.* Have you accepted Jesus as your Savior from brokenness, evil and death? If not, will you?

- Pastor and writer Frederick Buechner said, many times and in different settings, “Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing.” How can the truth (attested by multiple eyewitnesses) that the crucified Jesus is alive change your perspective on life’s disappointments, pain and sadness? If Jesus decisively defeated death itself (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:17-19, 50-55), what is there left for you to fear?

* Lewis, C.S., *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: The Chronicles of Narnia* (p. 163). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

CHAPTER 7

A PEOPLE OF MISSION

The New Testament book of Acts was volume two of the gospel of Luke. With the New Testament letters, it showed that although Jesus was the central person and vital focus of God's saving mission, the mission did not end when the risen Jesus returned to heaven. Far from it! In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descended on God's people to empower them to carry on Jesus' mission. Different messengers, same mission and message—and, ultimately, the same divine power at work in and through the message.

Unlike the yearning sense of hope that filled much of the Old Testament's story, now (even in the face of venomous ridicule and persecution by the Roman Empire) the Christians spoke and lived in the joyous confidence that the Messiah had come. Yes, they still waited eagerly, as we do, for the day when Jesus returns and God's victory over evil, won in the cross and resurrection, is made complete. But, just as the D-day invasion sealed the defeat of Hitler's murderous regime even though it took another year of battles to complete the victory, so the Christians lived in the confidence that

Jesus had made ultimate victory over evil certain. Rome could do its worst (and sometimes did), but the Christians marched on, certain that Jesus had even "set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15). Historical records show some Roman soldiers and officials expressing vexation: how were they supposed to stop people who wouldn't stop even when you threatened to kill them?

In the first part of Acts, we see the apostles Peter and Phillip led by the Holy Spirit to reach beyond the comfortable boundaries of their Hebrew background, and to share Jesus with Roman centurions and Ethiopian eunuchs. The zealous persecutor of Christians, Saul of Tarsus, did a 180 degree turn after Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and became a learned, often fiery, missionary determined to carry Jesus' mission to every corner of the Roman empire if he could. Acts is honest about various personal and theological issues the early Christians had to work out, sometimes in harmony, sometimes through conflict. But it also made it plain that ultimately none of those issues derailed the early Christians from their devotion to Jesus and his mission on the earth.

And God's mission has gone on through the centuries, right up to the present. Jesus does not physically walk the earth today, but we walk the earth in Jesus' place. The Holy Spirit guides all Christians, the church, to keep our eyes on God's mission—to make the world right, through Jesus Christ. God's mission is for a community, not just for individuals. All of Christ's followers, together, are the agency God is forming to make the world right—to faithfully pursue seeing God's dream for the world, a Kingdom marked by wholeness, made real.

God sent Jesus. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sends the church into the world to be witness to the person and work of Jesus. The gospel message, the truth that in Jesus

Christ there is salvation, is spread through us, the church. Jesus has commissioned us, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to do God's redemptive work in the world.

This redemptive work can take many forms, from sharing the gospel to caring for the sick, from feeding the poor and visiting the imprisoned to crossing international boundaries and learning new cultures in order to share Jesus with them. This redemptive work takes us one step closer to being made into the image in which we were created. When we live out our purpose, we participate with God to restore the world toward its intended wholeness.

As he was for the first Christians, the Holy Spirit is our guide, and our power. The Holy Spirit is present with us when we seek his presence. Learn to listen to the Spirit's prompting in your heart and do what the Spirit nudges you to do. We have as much of the Holy Spirit as we ask for and respond to in faith.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- Can you remember times when you felt a strong inner “nudge” to move your life or your actions in a direction that you can now see helped carry on Christ's mission in the world? You may or may not have realized it then, but our faith says that those kinds of inner nudges are the Holy Spirit's work. Sometimes it takes attention to notice and respond to them. Stay aware and respond, and see in what good directions Jesus may take your life through the Holy Spirit.
- God's redemptive work takes many forms. God does not expect any one of us to try to do them all—instead, God gifts each of us to carry out particular parts of the mission. Which

parts of God's redemptive, restoring mission best fit your gifts and abilities, and most energize you? Are there any that you'd like to get involved in, but haven't yet found the time and energy to start?

CHAPTER 8

RE-CREATION: GOD'S GOOD WORLD RESTORED

The Bible ended with a remarkable vision of hope and restoration. We call it the book of Revelation. The book took its name from its very first words—“A revelation of Jesus Christ.” Though some read the book as a revelation of horrible, scary events on earth, it is more clearly understood as a vision revealing, through apocalyptic symbols, God’s glory, goodness and ultimate victory over all the defiant powers of evil (in the writer’s day, the Roman Empire in particular—cf. Revelation 17:9). Like later representations like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the book is honest about the dark, painful times God’s people may face in this world, but it ends with a joyous, light-filled vision of the day when God’s mission is accomplished, and the world is restored to its intended wholeness. In Revelation 22:2, the tree of life, taken from humans after the fall, was restored, and its leaves were for “the healing of the nations.” That is the Bible’s final glorious garden, with death and tears banished in the light of God’s love.

The promise of our faith is that one day there will be no more disease, death or suffering. One day there will be no more violence and war. One day there will be no more sin of any

kind. God is working to transform this world to that day. God has always wanted the world to be whole, and still does. This is God’s Kingdom dream. All the people of the earth, including you, are called into this Kingdom dream. Some people choose not to live with Jesus as their King. But those of us who have chosen to let Jesus be the King of our life accept God’s call, and commit to participating with God in God’s redemptive work.

Our future is bright and full of hope! It is a future of new creation. God will restore the world to its intended wholeness and in doing so will give immeasurable value and worth to all of our present faithful actions of proclaiming and embodying the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our response to the present needs of this world is driven by the future God promises to shape.

Until that day comes, we wait. As we wait, we believe in the Kingdom and want everyone everywhere to experience God as King. We take action. We join the procession of God’s people through the centuries who have served God’s Kingdom faithfully with indomitable hope. We wait for the Kingdom’s full reign and strive to live a life that reflects the Kingdom God desires. We wait for Jesus to return to resurrect all of God’s people to spend eternity with God. We choose to faithfully and joyfully do things that help people everywhere experience God, making the world look like heaven, right here, right now, on earth. To participate with God is be like Jesus to all and announce the Kingdom of God. And we look forward, with eager trust, to the day when God will make the world we live in now new, and welcome us into that splendid garden filled with life and love forever.

« REFLECTION QUESTIONS »

- What do you most look forward to in the eternal future God has promised? In what ways does that help you to live with hope even when life becomes difficult or painful? How

can you share your hope with others who are discouraged or hurting?

- Some Christians fixate on images the Bible used to suggest the glory of God's eternity (e.g. streets of gold). Others struggle to take God's future seriously because the images feel far-fetched. But Revelation's central promise goes beyond those physical details: "I heard a loud voice from the throne say, 'Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God'" (Revelation 21:3). How appealing do you find the prospect of being with God in a way not possible in our broken world? How can you nurture a taste for being with God even now in your life choices?

APPENDIX 1:

HOW RESURRECTION'S STAINED GLASS WINDOW TELLS GOD'S BIG STORY

« CHAPTER 1 »

In the top section of the Resurrection Window you see a spiral galaxy, which artistically acknowledges God the Father as Maker of Heaven and Earth. The story begins in a garden, where Adam and Eve represent humanity, made in the image of God as the culmination of God's good creation. Symbolically, the name Adam means "humankind" and Eve means "living" or "life giver."

« CHAPTER 2 »

God asked Adam and Eve to refrain from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their story of disobedience reminds us of our universal struggle with temptation and sin. The leaves on the tree in this garden are turning colors and withering, and the bark is darkened, representing the brokenness of all humankind. We also see the sad results of disobedience as Cain, the first-born son of Adam and Eve, committed the first murder by leading his brother Abel into a field and killing him. When God asked Cain, "Where is your brother, Abel?" Cain

replied, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Their story illustrates the effect of sin on humanity – as paradise is lost, we see the first act of murder, brother killing brother. And we see Noah—through Noah's pivotal role in preserving life through a devastating flood, we find a foretaste of God's redemptive work through the cross.

« CHAPTER 3 »

Abram, whom God renamed Abraham, meaning "the father of many nations," is the founding patriarch of three of the world's five major religions. God blessed Abraham in order for him to become a blessing to others. In his story, we see the commencement of God's covenantal relationship with humankind, which continues throughout the entirety of Scripture, culminating in Jesus. In the window, we also see Abraham's wife and covenant partner Sarah with their son Isaac, Isaac's son Jacob and his son Joseph, who was taken as a slave to Egypt but, with God's blessing, rose to become second-in-command in that great power and saved his family to carry on the covenant. Moses, the great leader, led Israel out of Egypt, received the law from God on Mount Sinai, and took Israel to the borders of the land God promised to Abraham.

« CHAPTER 4 »

From the vast and varied cast of characters in the story of God's Old Testament people, we see Ruth and Naomi, Ruth's great-grandson King David, the prophet Daniel in the lions' den in Babylon and Esther, who used her station as queen of Persia to rescue her people from a murderous plot. In fainter images, representing the "cloud of witnesses" in God's eternal kingdom (cf. Hebrews 12:1), we also see other Old Testament saints: Hagar, Jochebed (with baby Moses), Zipporah, Joshua, Rahab, Caleb, Samuel, Deborah, King Solomon, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. These men and women represent the "Communion of the

Saints," the spiritual union of the members of the church, both in heaven and on earth.

« CHAPTER 5 »

As the window moves to the center of the story, we see images drawn from the life of Jesus. His mother Mary cradles the infant, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River as the Spirit descends on him, and he gathers followers and preaches and heals in powerful ways that both went beyond people's expectations, and yet fell short of their wishes for a military and political king.

The river, by the way, is not incidental to the window's artistic depiction of God's big story. It flows across the window because, throughout the Bible, rivers played an important role. Rivers were shown flowing from Eden and through the restored Paradise. In between was the Jordan River where the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land and where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. As it flows across the window, the river forms the shape of an Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, symbolizing fullness or completeness.

« CHAPTER 6 »

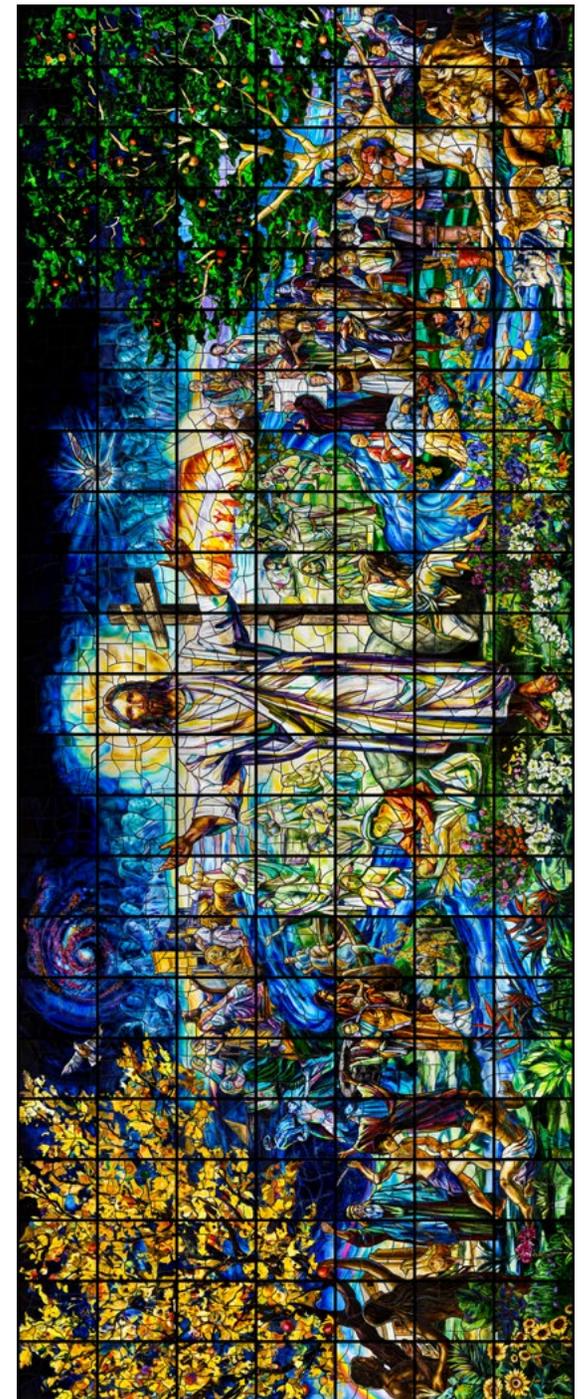
In the center of the window, the largest figure in the artwork just as he is the central figure in God's big story, stands the risen Jesus, hands outstretched in mercy and welcome. Around him is another garden. John writes in his gospel that Jesus was crucified in a garden, buried in a garden, and when he rose from the dead, he appeared to Mary as a gardener. We see Mary weeping in the garden just before she recognizes the risen Jesus. John intends for us to see that Christ has come to restore Paradise and to set the world aright. In this panel, the "tree" is the cross where Jesus died to redeem humanity. Through the cross, God's saving and redeeming work is accomplished. The course of history is changed. The restoration of Paradise has begun.

« CHAPTER 7 »

Over the figures in the right side of the window hovers a dove, the symbol of God the Holy Spirit (cf. Mark 1:10). The Spirit's descent on Christ's followers at the Day of Pentecost signaled that Christ's saving mission went on, carried on by Jesus' Spirit-empowered disciples. The window includes a representative sample of the millions who have followed Jesus through the ages. We see Bible characters like the apostles Paul and Peter, as well as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, James, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the "cloud of witnesses." There are Christian leaders like Augustine of Hippo and St. Francis of Assisi, world-changing reformers like Martin Luther and John Wesley (Methodism's founder), and more modern people like E. Stanley Jones, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Rosa Parks and Billy Graham. Be sure to notice the only Resurrection member in the window, the boy sitting by the river reading a book to a little girl—he is Matthew Joyner, whose special needs in this life gave rise to Resurrection's Matthew's Ministry, pictured whole in God's eternal Kingdom.

« CHAPTER 8 »

God's big story doesn't wander aimlessly—it is going somewhere, somewhere wonderful. The window's visual narrative comes, in the end, to the Tree of Life restored (cf. Revelation 22:2), to God's eternal peaceable Kingdom where the lamb dwells safely with the wolf and the lion (cf. Isaiah 11:6-9). The beauty, light and life are not just for a few spiritual super-heroes, but for all of God's people, represented by the unnamed worshipers in the foreground at bottom right. Throughout eternity, they will praise and worship Jesus', who made it all possible.



APPENDIX 2

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVELY SHARING YOUR FAITH STORY

The artistry and striking beauty of the stained glass window in the Leawood sanctuary will create curiosity and questions from family members, neighbors and co-workers. We want you to be equipped to share God's big, saving story in winsome, persuasive ways when the curiosity and questions create opportunities to do so.

Far too many of us have been on the receiving end of guilt based, gloom-and-doom efforts to evangelize. The bad taste these approaches create has sometimes led us to just give up on trying to share God's big story and our own faith stories. Let's reclaim "evangelism" as communicating the good news that centers around Christ's life, death and resurrection, that in the words of the Gospel of John: "The Word became flesh and made his home among us."

Here are some ideas about how to do that, drawn primarily from the "Cultivate" class developed by Chris Folmsbee, Resurrection's Director of Discipleship Ministries. For more information about the Cultivate class, go to cor.org/leawood/getconnected.

1. Be interested in the other person as a person, not just as a potential "catch":

Open your eyes - Don't see people in comparison
Open your ears - Learn how to listen intentionally
Open your hands - Meet visible needs of the people around you
Open your mind - Looking at different ways to do things
Open your heart - Walk with people through hard times

By doing this, you can meet people's need for:

Acceptance - Showing people approval
Encouragement - Inspire people to do goodness
Affection - Reaching out and touching someone
Respect - Showing people dignity
Comfort - Showing people you care
Appreciation - Saying thank you to people

2. As you explain God's big story as told in the window, it's important to connect that to your faith story. The story the Bible tells isn't just something that happened long ago—it goes on today, and you are a part of it. So sharing your faith story is a crucial part of sharing God's big story—you walk in the footsteps of the real people, great and small, who responded to God in the Bible. And you are more real to the people who know you than any of the Bible characters. Your faith story is:

Personal

Practical

Powerful

3) “Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy” (1 Peter 3:16, *The Message*). Many people find it helpful, as a means to “be ready,” to create a storyboard of their life. Here’s a guide to help you think about the ways that God’s big story has intersected your life, and changed it for the better.

Storyboard Your Life:

My childhood and life growing up...	A significant event that shaped my life...
An important decision I’ve made in my faith journey...	The most important people in my life and why...
Areas God is changing me now...	What I hope to see in my future...

After putting key words and phrases on your storyboard, devote some time to writing out your faith story as a rough narrative. Add as many details as you think are relevant during this initial exercise. When you are finished, set the narrative aside for at least a few hours. Then read it out loud. How long does it take you to read your story? Ask yourself honestly if there is information that is truly extraneous or even distracting, and remove those details. Find someone you trust, and share your faith story with them. Let them help you make it as concise and appealing as possible.



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