

If someone asked you, “What is the Bible actually about?” what would you say?

The Bible consists of 66 books, written by about 40 different people across about 1,500 years on 3 different continents. It might appear to be a hotch-potch of diverse and unrelated poems and laws and letters and narratives, and yet it tells one consistent story from Genesis to Revelation.

I will try to tell you the big story of the Bible from the viewpoint of God. Dangerous but here goes.

It started very well – very, very well. **I created** everything: the galaxies, the planets, the earth, the oceans, mountains, beaches, rivers; the animals. The diversity; the complexity; the beauty.

The pinnacle of my creation were people: Adam and Eve. I wanted relationship; I wanted to shower my love on them. I planned a partnership. I placed them in an amazingly beautiful world. I gave them the opportunity and the freedom to care for the world and fill it with more people whom I could love.

It was perfect. I was their God and they were my people. We were close. We enjoyed each other, until...

As a I tell you this story, it is going to sound like a series of failures. It might look like *I* have failed again and again. This first plan didn't work, but I invite you to consider whether it was really I who failed.

Adam and Eve had almost endless freedom and opportunity, with one restriction. I did not want them to experience evil. I said, “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. **They decided** they knew better. They ate from it. Satan tempted them, but they made the choice.

The world changed right there. Pride and rebellion and disobedience had not been known before, but they were realities now. The whole world was damaged. Sin puts a wedge between people and me. We were no longer close. Their relationship with each other was strained. The ground no longer yielded crops as easily as it had. Instead they got thorns.

You must understand I want the very best for people. I hate evil; I hate the brokenness of the world. I want better than this. I want you to experience better than this – than this world you live in.

Sin and evil have no place in *my* world. When people choose their own way, they separate themselves from me. I gave life. When they reject me they rejected life. They chose death. The wages of sin is death.

I knew they were going to turn away from me, but I still loved them. I had already devised a plan to win them back. In fact, that is what this story is all about: winning you back. The rest of this story is my plan.

I told them one of the woman's descendants would defeat Satan. This is His story.

But that is way in the future. The more immediate impact was that their descendants spiralled out of control. The story is dominated by murder, division, dishonesty, immorality. It got so bad that I decided to flood the earth, killing everyone except righteous Noah and his family. But their descendants were just as bad. But I still wanted to win them back.

I chose Abraham, and his wife, Sarah. I made a covenant with him. I promised him land. He would be the father of many nations, and he would be a blessing to all nations. Abraham's responsibility was to walk faithfully before Me. They were to circumcise every male descendant, as a sign of the covenant.

And Abraham was faithful and obedient – by and large. He trusted me. He left his family and homeland and travelled to a land he didn't know. He was willing to sacrifice his only son. He had faith. I provided a substitute ram for the sacrifice, and I gave him back his son. Abraham was a good start.

My intention was to have a people who would be different from every other nation. I wanted them to be a light to the nations, to show the world what it meant to be my people and for me to be their God. I gave them practices – circumcision, food laws – that would show that they were a people dedicated to me.

Abraham's 12 great-grandsons became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. But sin was still a reality. They would do some terrible things. Eventually, a famine drove them to Egypt where there was food, but there they became slaves. For 400 years they were slaves, until I raised up Moses to lead them out.

That was a whole drama of plagues and miracles. Those who did as I told them and sacrificed a lamb, putting its blood on the doorposts, were saved. I divided the Red Sea and led the whole nation through on dry ground. By this time, they had multiplied to be a nation, and they were about to have their own land. They have remembered their exodus out of Egypt ever since. It was a foretaste of my bigger plan to save people. It was a sign not only of my power, but of my love and my justice. Wrong will be righted.

Soon after, I gave them my law in ten statements, spelling out what it means to be my people. But the same old pattern emerged. The first commandments said they were to have no other gods before me. They immediately made a golden calf and worshipped that. Can you believe it? What should have been an 11-day journey to the land I had promised became a 40-year wandering in the wilderness. I led them; I provided for them; I protected them. I loved them. I instructed them to make a tent that would be where I dwelt and where they could meet with me. They repeatedly disobeyed me and complained.

How could we relate? I provided a way for them to be forgiven and for our relationship to be restored: animal sacrifices. An animal would die in their place.

Eventually, they did enter the Promised Land, with strict instructions to make it their own and to not adopt the practices of the peoples living there. My people were to be different. Yet again they disobeyed. They compromised with those pagan nations. They adopted their practices and worshipped their gods. I kept raising up leaders for them. Things would come right for a while then they would turn away from me again. Repeatedly I delivered them; repeatedly they turned away from me.

Then they decided they wanted a king –like the other nations. In reality, they were rejecting me as their king. I warned them of the consequences, but they were determined. So, I gave them a king. I guess you are seeing a pattern by now, but that king disobeyed me. I replaced him with King David. He also failed badly, but he repented and genuinely wanted to do what was right. He became the greatest king in Israel's history. It is said of him that he was a man after my own heart. The nation was united; it expanded; Jerusalem became the capital. In fact, the next king, Solomon, built the temple there. Like the tent in the wilderness, the Temple was my dwelling place among the people. The system of sacrifices continued. I want that relationship. I provided for their forgiveness.

After Solomon things went from bad to worse. The kingdom split in two. In both, there was a succession of corrupt kings. To be fair, there was a handful of faithful kings; there were times of kind-of repentance, but the trajectory was downwards – to the point that I allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom, Israel, taking the people into exile. Later I allowed the Babylonians to conquer the southern kingdom, Judah, taking the people into exile.

For centuries I had raised up prophets to call the people back to me. By-and-large the people ignored them. Right up to the exile, the prophets told them what would happen unless they repented. To no avail.

Despite centuries of disobedience, I still wanted them back. My prophets started to speak of hope and deliverance. Immediate deliverance from exile but also my ultimate plan. I mentioned Him way back in the context of Adam and Eve, and there had been other indications over the centuries, but increasingly the prophets spoke of a coming Messiah – a new King David who would deliver the people and rule with justice and mercy.

Then the immediate deliverance happened. Cyrus let them return. It was only a remnant but eventually they rebuilt the Temple and the city walls, and renewed the covenant. It wasn't all plain sailing though. Over the next few hundred years they were occupied by the Greeks and then the Romans. Again, they were desperate for deliverance, and desperate for that promised Messiah.

One day, a baby was born in Bethlehem. By no means an ordinary baby. He had been miraculously conceived. I know you find this hard to get your heads around, but I became a human being. I became one of you. That baby was my Son – God incarnate. **Jesus**, the Messiah. Emmanuel, meaning God with us.

At about 30, Jesus was baptised. He resisted a major attack from Satan and began faithfully doing all that I had asked of Him. He began ministering to people: teaching, befriending, healing, casting out demons, forgiving. Yes, forgiving – something only I can do. In other words, He modelled what it is to be loved by me and to love me. And He modelled the healing of the world. All that had been damaged by that original disobedience, He started putting right: health instead of sickness, reconciliation instead of alienation. He raised dead people. He spoke of this as being the Kingdom of God. This is what it is like when I rule and my will is done. For millennia people had rebelled against my rule. They preferred to follow Satan. Jesus demonstrated a new way.

Jesus called other people to choose my way. His cousin, John the Baptist, had done the same, calling people to repent, to change direction. Jesus constantly called people to turn. When He said, "Follow me" He was challenging people to do things His way, no longer their way.

He chose 12 men. He poured His life into them. They followed Him everywhere. They watched Him. The invitation was to learn from Him so as to be like Him. At times it didn't look promising.

The Kingdom of God is significantly different from the way of the world. Following me does mean turning your back on many things, but it also means receiving far greater things. People have to choose. From the beginning people had had to choose. Most often they rejected my love and my ways. Jesus never did that. He never sinned. Nobody else has ever been completely faithful, but He was.

But that put Him at odds with the religious leaders. This new way was a threat to their old ways and their privilege. His influence was a threat to their influence. His purity exposed their darkness. His claim to be God incensed them. So much so that they decided they had to kill Him.

Satan, of course, was behind it. He had to ensure that my Kingdom project failed. He incited one of Jesus' own disciples to betray Him. Killing Jesus would be the end of it.

Remember that I said that one of Eve's descendants would defeat Satan? What seemed like Satan's ultimate victory was actually his ultimate defeat. On His last night with His disciples, Jesus said, "This is the new covenant in my blood". Jeremiah foretold a new covenant. It was sealed at the Cross.

Since the beginning sin is atoned for only by a death. That is what the Temple sacrifices were all about. Jesus became the sacrificial lamb. He took all of the sins of all people of all ages on Himself and paid the price for all of you. Justice is fundamentally important and justice was done when He voluntarily died in your place. Your sins have been paid for. All that remains is for you to trust Him and follow Him.

It looked like Satan had won. But, on the third day, I raised Jesus from the dead. People met Him again. His resurrection declared He truly was my son and the Messiah. He had lived a perfectly obedient life. He had accomplished all that I had asked of Him, including dying so that sinful people might be brought back into the family. This is what I had wanted all along. I wanted to win you back.

His disciples were amazed and overjoyed when they met Him again.

The world needed to know about Jesus, about forgiveness. Jesus commissioned them to go everywhere calling others to follow Him – to do things Jesus' way – to be disciples of Jesus including telling yet more

people about Him. Then He ascended into heaven, but I poured out my Holy Spirit on them. I would be with them to the end of the age. I would empower them, lead them, transform them. The church was/is the new Temple: the place where I dwell. The good news of Jesus spread throughout Israel, Syria, North Africa, Europe. People – some people – chose the Jesus way, trusted Him enough to follow Him. Churches were planted. They needed to be taught and led. Leaders were appointed; letters were written.

Many of those first disciples lost their lives calling people to follow Jesus. Likewise, many of the second generation of Christians. My Kingdom threatens some people. But the good news kept spreading.

However, the world is still broken. The early churches were tremendous, but they struggled with division, immorality, false teaching. I am sure you understand. You have to live in this broken world where a whole lot is still very wrong. People still have choices and only a few choose me.

But I haven't finished. I still want to win you back. I wanted Israel to be a shining light to the nations, a people dedicated to me, a distinctive witness. They would be my people, I would be their God, and the world would see what that looked like. That was one of the many failures in this story.

But now, I am asking you to do that – to be a light to the nations, a light to your neighbours. To be a holy people – people dedicated to me, a people who have a different king and therefore a different set of values and a different lifestyle. I want the church to be a living demonstration of the Kingdom of God – in a very broken world.

There is one more chapter to this story. It is my favourite chapter. It is the chapter that all of the other chapters have been leading to.

One day, Jesus will step back into history. Two things will happen. I will bring this broken world to an end. All that is wrong and painful and destructive will be judged. But there will also be a new creation. All of those who rejected me will be judged. It grieves me that I will not manage to win everyone back. Some will reject everything I have done. I created them. I cared for them. I died for them. They still chose their own way. I will honour the choice they have made. They will be condemned to an eternity without me.

But those who have trusted me will live forever. I will be their God, and they will be my people. I will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things will have passed away. I so look forward to that. Will you be there?

Winning You Back

For Reflection

1. What would you say were some of the themes (or, threads) that ran through this version of the Bible story?
2. There are others. What other themes can you think of that tie the story together?
3. Briefly tell the big story of the Bible using some of those other themes. Write it down if that helps clarify your thoughts.
4. There is one main plotline that runs through the biblical story but there are also many sub-plots. The Bible is sometimes likened to a jigsaw. There are many pieces, but we cannot see the big picture until we know where the pieces fit. Randomly choose some story from the Bible, or a song, or a letter or whatever and see if you can describe how it is part of the big story.
5. What is your overall impression having read, or heard, the big story of the Bible?
6. Where do you see yourself in that story?
7. Is there something the biblical story inspires or challenges you to do?