

Duvall, J. Scott., and J. Daniel Hays. *Living God's Word, Second Edition: Discovering Our Place in the Great Story of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021.

# CLASS OVERVIEW

## WEEKLY MEETING

- Wednesdays 6:15pm in the Studio of the Blue Building
- This is the primary delivery of our content.
- This meeting is designed to be interactive. Please participate.
- We will have natural breaks.
- This will be shared teaching.

## BOOK READINGS

- You will have weekly readings from book *Living God's Word*.
- Underline / Highlight take notes in the margins.

## BIBLE READINGS

- You will have weekly readings (or listenings) from the Bible (I would do these first).
- These will not follow the Bible Recap plan but if you've say recently read Gen 1-11 just do a quick scan. We want this class to enhance your Bible Recap readings.
- Take notes in any notebook.

## SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Do you best to think through these questions.
- Keep a journal.
- Be honest.

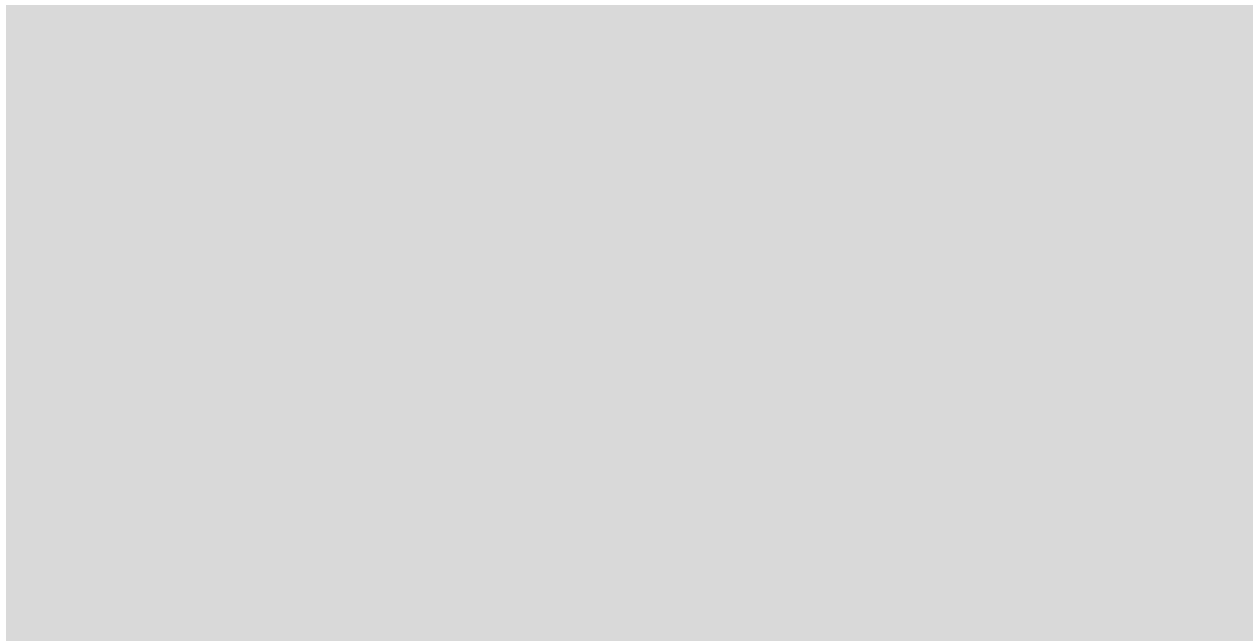
## ARTICLES

- We will provide an occasional article these are optional reading, but are intended to reinforce what we are discussing.

# INTRODUCTION

# OUR GUIDING STORY

“The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world.”  
-N.T. Wright



# FIVE BASIC QUESTIONS

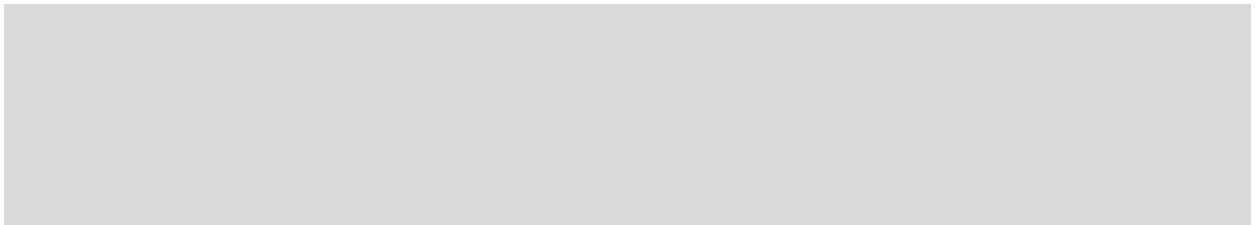
1. Where are we? What kind of world do we live in?



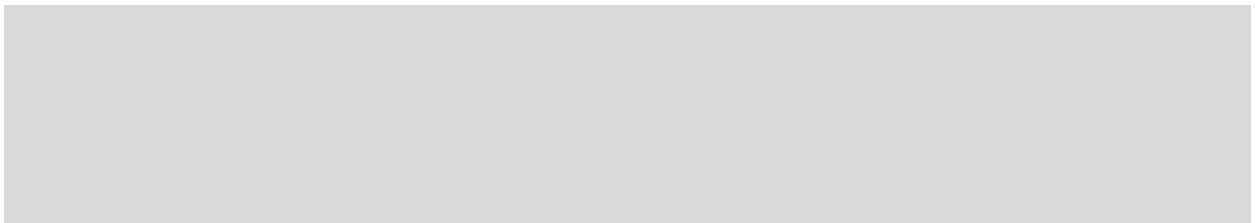
2. Who are we? What does it mean to be a human being?



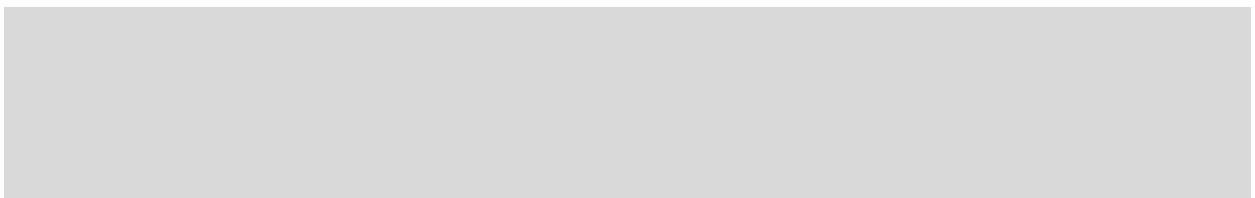
3. What's wrong? What is the essential problem with us and the world?



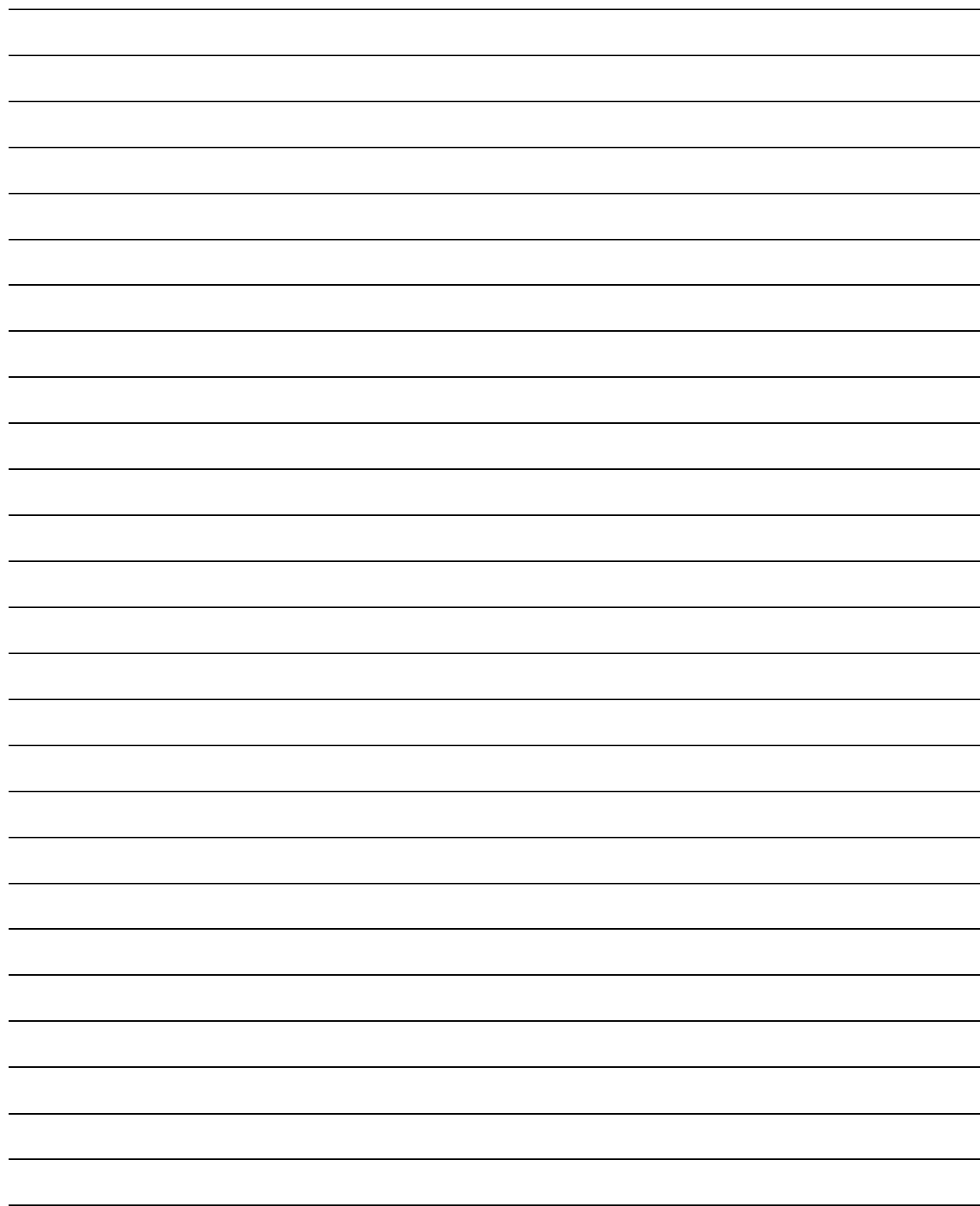
4. What's the solution? What can fix the problem?



5. Where are we in the Story? Where do we belong, and how does the Story affect our lives right now?









## The Great Story of the Bible

The Great Story	Location in the Bible
Creation and Crisis	Genesis 1 – 11
Covenant	Genesis 12 – 50
Calling Out	Exodus 1 – 15
Commandments	Exodus 16 – 40, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
Conquest and Canaanization	Joshua, Judges
Creation of the Kingdom	Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1 – 11, 1 Chronicles; 2 Chronicles 1 – 9
Communion and Common Sense	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
Crumbling of the Kingdom	1 Kings 12 – 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 10 – 36, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah
Captivity and Coming Home	Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
Interlude: Time between the Testaments	
Christ	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Church	Acts, Paul's Letters, General Letters
Consummation	Revelation

# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

**What steps do you need to take to become more like Christ?**

- 1
- 2
- 3

**Can the Bible be a guiding story?**

**Why are our stories important in our society?**

**Explain the connection between the story we have in the Bible and our story.**

**In light of your reading this week what does it look like for you to Live God's Word?**

# HOMework

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorize             | Genesis 1.1   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Text        | Genesis 1-11 (chapters)   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read                 | Duvall/Hays, Chapter 1, pgs. 1-11   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review               | "Preface"/ "Introduction" of <i>Living God's Word</i> or<br>watch video: "Living God's Word Introduction" |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Complete             | Choose and complete 1 writing assignment (from<br><i>Living God's Word</i> pg. 11).                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reflection Questions | Complete reflection questions (from handout above)  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Invite               | Who do you know that needs to be a part of this class?  |

# LIVING INTO GOD'S STORY

*By Eugene Peterson*

The Bible is basically and overall a narrative, an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative. Stories hold pride of place in revealing God and God's way to us. It follows that storytellers in our Christian community carry a major responsibility for keeping us alert to these stories and the way they work. Our best storytellers learn their craft from Jesus, famous for using story to involve his listeners in recognizing and dealing with God in their lives.

In both the Old and New Testaments of our Christian Scriptures, story is the primary means of bringing God's Word to us. For that we can be most grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell and listen to stories. Neither stupidity nor sophistication puts us outside the magnetic field of story. The only serious rival to story in terms of accessibility and attraction is song, and there are plenty of those in the Bible too.

But there is another reason for the appropriateness of story as a major means of bringing us God's Word. Story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there; story invites our participation. A good storyteller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters, see into nooks and crannies of life that we had overlooked, realize there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored. If the storyteller is good, doors and windows open. Our biblical storytellers were good, in both the moral and aesthetic sense of them.

Of course, not all stories are good; some lack honesty. There are sentimentalizing stories that seduce us into escaping from life; there are propagandistic stories that attempt to enlist us in a cause or bully us into stereotyping responses; there are trivializing stories that represent life as merely cute or diverting.

The Bible's honest stories respect our freedom; they don't manipulate us, don't force us, don't distract us from life. They show us a spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses. First through our imaginations and then through our faith - imagination and faith are close kin here - they offer us a place in the story, invite us into this large story that takes place under the broad skies of God's purposes in contrast to the gossipy anecdotes that we cook up in the stuffy closets of the self. They invite us in as participants in something larger than our sin-defined needs, in something truer than our culture-stunted ambitions. We enter these stories and recognize ourselves as participants, whether willing or unwilling, in the life of God.

This need saying because we live in an age when story has been pushed from its biblical front-line prominence to a bench on the sidelines, condescended to as "illustration" or "testimony" or "inspiration." Both inside and outside the church, we prefer information over story. We typically gather impersonal (pretentiously called "scientific" or theological") information, whether doctrinal or philosophical or historical, in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. And we commonly consult outside experts to interpret the information for us.

But we don't live our lives by information. We live them in relationships in the context of a community of men and women - each person an intricate bundle of experience and motive and desire, and of personal God, who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation. Information-gathering and consultation of experts leave out nearly everything that is uniquely us - our personal histories and relationship, our sins and guilt, our moral character and believing obedience to God.

Telling a story is the primary verbal way of accounting for life the way we live it in actual day-by-day reality. There are no (of few) abstractions in a story - story is immediate, concrete, plotted, relational, personal. And so when we lose touch with our lives, our souls - our moral and spiritual, our God-personal

lives - story is the best way of getting us back in touch again. Which is why God's Word is given for the most part in the form of story. And it is a vast, over-reaching, all-encompassing story - a meta-story.

The form in which language comes to us is as important as its content. If we mistake its form, we will almost certainly respond wrongly to its content. If we mistake a recipe for vegetable stew for a set of clues for finding buried treasure, no matter how carefully we read it, we will end up as poor as ever and hungry besides. If we misread a highway road sign, "60 miles per hour," as a randomly posted piece of information rather than as stern imperative; we will eventually find ourselves pulled over on the side of the road with a police officer correcting our grammar. Ordinarily, we learn these discriminations early and well and give form and content equal weight in determining meaning.

But when it comes to Scripture we don't do nearly as well. Maybe it is because Scripture comes to us so authoritatively, "God's Word," that we think all we can do is submit and obey. Submission and obedience are part of it, but first we have to listen. And listening requires hearing the way it is said (form) as well as what is said (content).

Stories suffer misinterpretation when we don't submit to them simply as stories. We are caught off-guard when divine revelation arrives in such ordinary garb, and we think it's our job to dress it up in the latest Paris silk gown of theology or outfit it in a three-piece suit of ethics before we can deal with it. The simple, or not so simple, story is soon, like David under Saul's armor, so encumbered with moral admonitions, theological constructs, and scholarly debates that it can hardly move. There are always moral, theological, historical elements in these stories, which need to be studied and ascertained, but never in despite of or in defiance of the story, which is being told.

Spiritual theology, using Scripture as text, does not so much present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us, "Live into this - this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being." We don't have to fit into prefabricated moral and mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God. We are taken seriously just as we are and given place in his story - for it is, after all, God's story. None of us is the leading character in the story of our lives. God is the larger context and plot in which all our stories find themselves.

# THE STORY

The story of the Bible begins with God. In the beginning, God created the universe. God is not a part of the universe as a mere power but is a separate and independent Creator who willfully and deliberately created everything that exists. Being an expression of God's own beauty, love, and relational character, creation belongs to God. Everything in creation, therefore, from the smallest and seemingly most insignificant to the crowning work, the human being, finds its meaning and reason for existence in the relationship between the Creator and his creation.

To express his love, God decided to give to creation an expression of his own image—the human being. He created the human being as man and woman and gave them managerial power over the rest of creation. They were to live in a close and loving relationship with their Creator and conduct their lives as an expression of that relationship. Human beings, however, decided that they could live on their own without God. This decision destroyed the intimacy of their relationship with the Creator; and as this relationship deteriorated, the image of God faded; and humans lost the true quality of their humanity.

Outside God's presence, human beings experienced the results of the destroyed fellowship with God. Blessing had been exchanged for curse. Envy, pain, and evil (even to the point of murder) became commonplace. Humans proved that the goodness and love that came from the presence of God were annihilated by their own desire to put themselves first. Sin, which in its essence is the rebellion of

humans against God, had become the governing quality of humankind. Evil grew and covered the earth; God was forgotten.

The never ending grace of God, however, would not let go of the crowning work of creation. Rather than withdrawing, God established a new covenantal relationship with humankind. A man named Abraham, who is now considered the father of faith (Luke 16.24; Rom 4.16-5.2; Heb 11.17) because of his unwavering trust in God, received a promise that his numerous descendants would be blessed. In fact, blessing would come to the whole earth through them. Because of this covenant promise given to Abraham, all the people of the earth would have the opportunity to experience the blessing of God's presence once again.

The promise of Abraham was a unilateral promise; that is, it was a promise from God with no condition placed on man. It was an expression of pure grace; God placed it solely upon himself to reestablish the relationship with the rebellious creatures he originally had created in his own image. This Abrahamic covenant thus became the basis for the salvation of human beings. Again and again, in spite of the repeated attempts by humans to destroy their relationship with the Creator, God remembered his covenant with Abraham and opened a door for humans to find a way back into his presence.

At first it looked as if God's promise was empty; Abraham was without children. But in Abraham's old age, God granted

him a son of promise, Isaac, who in turn became the father of a son, Jacob. Jacob, whom God later renamed Israel, had twelve sons whose names would later give rise to the names of

Israel's twelve tribes. God had created for himself a people called Israel. This people, also called the Hebrews, were to be recognized and characterized by their trust in the one God, the creator of heaven and earth.

Famine came upon the land, and the family of Jacob went to Egypt to find food. In Egypt, the people of Israel increased in number; and as time passed, the Egyptian rulers, called pharaohs, worried that the Israelites would become too powerful. To counter this threat, the pharaohs enslaved the Israelites. For approximately 400 years, the faithful among the people cried to God for help in their misery. In these darkest of days, an Egyptian princess fell in love with one of the Israelite babies called Moses and took him as her son to be raised as an Egyptian prince. When he came of age, Moses realized his Hebrew heritage and left Egypt to live in the desert. Remembering his covenant with Abraham, God called Moses in the desert and charged him with the task of liberating his people from their bondage in Egypt. Moses refused, arguing that he did not even know the name of Israel's God. At a burning bush, God revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh, the I AM, the one who is always present with his people.

Moses returned to Egypt, imploring Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, but Pharaoh would not listen. Plagues sent by God invaded the land, but Pharaoh did not listen not even when God gave his last warning. Yahweh promised to send the angel of death to visit every household in

Egypt and kill the firstborn of all families unless Pharaoh released Israel from slavery and allowed them to leave Egypt to worship God in the desert.

To avoid death in the families of Israel, God told his people to make a meal in haste. They took the blood of a lamb and smeared it on the door frames to let the angel of death know that he was to pass over their homes. God would save his people by the blood of the lamb.

After this final plague, Egypt let Israel go, even hurrying them along. Israel left and come to the sea of reeds. By this time the Egyptians regretted their decision to release the slaves and sent out armies to take them back. The Hebrews were caught between the water and the Egyptian army. They were trapped; the only way of escape went through the water—an impossible situation.

God kept his promise to Abraham, however, and opened the waters for them to cross to the other side. The Egyptians, close behind, drowned on the bottom of the sea as God closed the waters as soon as Israel passed through. God had rescued his people!

He had created for them an *exodus*—a way out of slavery. They were now on their way to the land God had promised them, free to follow him and to live in his presence. He would guide them through the desert by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night.

A new situation had become a reality for Israel. Yahweh was in the midst of his people; the holy Creator God lived among humans. He dwelled among them in a tabernacle—a portable tent designed for worship, the celebration of God's presence.

How were people to live in this new situation? What guidelines should govern this new relationship? God called Moses to a mountaintop and gave him a set of rules consisting of Ten Commandments—Ten Commandments that became the foundation for a new bilateral covenant called the Mosaic covenant. It was bilateral because demands were put on both parties in the relationship. Yahweh promised he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell in their midst. They were to keep the Law expressed in the commandments. Beyond the Ten Commandments, other rules and regulations were written down to define how the Israelites should live and worship the God in their midst. As a legal covenant, the Mosaic covenant required man's obedience to the Law as its central feature. This was different from the Abrahamic covenant, which had God's faithfulness to his promise as its central feature.

As usual, God kept his end of the agreement. He led the people to the edge of the land promised to Abraham—Canaan; but when they arrived, they were afraid to take possession of the land. This lack of trust in God sent them back into the desert to wander for forty years. Only after that faithless generation had died off did Yahweh again lead them to enter the land. After Moses' death, Joshua became the leader of the people, and he led them to victory after victory until they took possession of the land God had promised them.

Following Joshua's death in the Promised Land, a series of judges became leaders of the people. People like Gideon, Deborah, and Samson led Israel's armies and passed judgment on the people. This is

sometimes considered the dark age of Hebrew history. Not only did many of the people stop worshipping Yahweh, but several of the judges were active in worshipping idols. It was a dark day for the relationship between God and his people. But as before, God ended the misery of his people. The time of the judges came to an end as Israel elected a king like the other peoples.

During the reign of the second of these kings, King David, the promise from God approached its fulfillment for the nation of Israel. The Abrahamic covenant—with its promise of land, blessing, and peace—came close to a complete fulfillment during David's reign. David was Yahweh's answer to the destitution caused by the period of the judges. He was a man after God's own heart, a shepherd boy whose greatest desire was to please God.

Under David the kingdom grew to a hitherto unknown size and greatness. David made Jerusalem the capital of Israel and sought to build Yahweh a temple. This task, however, fell to his son, Solomon.

Nonetheless, God was pleased with David's desire to build a temple for Yahweh's presence among his people, and so he extended a covenant promise to David. God promised to make David's name great, grant an eternal place for his people, and establish a permanent dynasty in the Davidic line. This Davidic covenant, like the Abrahamic, was a unilateral covenant with no condition placed on humans for its fulfillment. It forms the basis for Israel's hope as later expressed by the prophets and most climactically underscored in the genealogies of Jesus.



Solomon, who followed his father David as king, became world renowned for his wisdom and incredible wealth. Out of this wealth, he built Yahweh a temple in Jerusalem. Upon its completion, the Bible explains how God filled the temple with his

presence. Solomon disobeyed God in other areas, however, and "did not have the heart of his father." Solomon's sin led to the split of the kingdom after his death. Ten tribes followed Jeroboam, a former general under Solomon who established the kingdom of Israel in the north; two tribes stayed with Rehoboam, Solomon's son, to establish the kingdom of Judah in the south. These two nations picked up where the judges left off and continued the destruction of their relationship with God. Even priests replaced the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal, a Canaanite god. The people seemed intent on breaking the Mosaic covenant.

During this time, the eighth century before Christ, prophets spoke out from both the North and the South, warning the people of the imminent judgment of God. The prophetic message proclaimed God's indictment on the people. God's people had violated the covenant by their idolatry, their social injustice, and their religious formalism. "You have broken the covenant," the prophets charged, "you must repent! If there is no repentance, judgment will come!" And judgment came! The Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BC; and Babylon destroyed Judah in 586 BC, forcing a large number of Hebrews into exile in Babylon. The people had broken their covenantal relationship with God, and they now had to rely solely on the hope of restoration, which had always been part of the prophetic message.

During the exile, the focus of the people changed. Prophets like Ezekiel (similar to Jeremiah before him) looked forward to a time when God's law no longer would be written on tablets of stone but on human hearts—a time when God's Spirit would indwell every member of God's family to ensure an internal drawing toward God's word and will. God will establish a new covenant with his people, they proclaimed.

Daniel, a devout young man from Judah, who counseled the king of Babylon during the exile, saw a vision of someone like a Son of man who possessed authority and who was to create an everlasting kingdom. People from all nations and all languages would come to worship this Son of Man. It was a time of renewed hope.

The Mosaic covenant was shattered, but the prophets were looking back to the unilateral covenants given to Abraham and David. God would no longer limit his presence to the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel shared a vision in which God's throne was on wheels moving in every direction. In the days to come, God would move with his people as in the days of old—not just among them as with the tabernacle but within them through his Spirit. The glory that had left the temple would be manifested through the people of the Spirit.

When Persia conquered Babylon, the Persians allowed the people of Israel to return. After seventy years of exile, Zerubbabel led God's people back to the Promised Land to rebuild the temple. The restoration of the wall around Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the full worship of Yahweh came later under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. These leaders of Israel made great efforts to

bring Israel back to preexilic times. But it never happened! Yahweh did not return to fill the temple as he did under Solomon. The nation of Israel did not become truly independent. The Mosaic covenant had been broken, and it would not be restored. The Law no longer defined the covenant relationship between God and his people; it functioned simply as a rigorous guideline for living. The period after the exile, the so-called postexilic period, functioned as an interim period between the judgment of the exile and the promise of a new covenant restoration where God once again would be visible among his people. This new covenant, which prophets like Jeremiah, Joel, and others had prophesied about, was to be a covenant of the Spirit.

The people had broken the bilateral Mosaic covenant, but God remembered his covenant with Abraham and David. In the fullness of time, some 400 years later, he sent his own Son in the form of a human to fulfill the promises of blessing to the world and eternal kingship on David's throne. The New Testament begins its story by placing this Son in the lineage of both David and Abraham.

An angel of God visited a priest named Zechariah while he was doing his ministry in the temple and told him that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son who would be great in the eyes of God. The child, John, who became known as John the Baptist, served as the forerunner to the Messiah. His purpose was to announce to the people that the new covenant relationship God had promised was at hand. John the Baptist, in other words, served as a prophetic bridge between the old and new covenants.

God's angel, Gabriel, visited a young girl from Judah named Mary and told her that

God's own Spirit would overshadow her and make her pregnant. The child to come should be called Jesus, which means Savior. He would become the long-awaited Messiah whom the prophets had looked for to save the world.

Jesus was born in simple circumstances and grew in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man. At about thirty years of age, Jesus came to the desert where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing, and he asked John to baptize him. Coming up from the water, God initiated Jesus' ministry when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove; and God spoke the words: "This is My beloved Son. I take delight in Him!"

Everywhere he went, Jesus preached the message that God's kingdom had come near. For three years he walked and taught. His message was consistent in both word and deed. God's kingdom had come near. Some people were confused, however, because their expectations of the promised Messiah were so different from what they saw in Jesus. Even John the Baptist, who himself had looked forward to God's intervention, became confused and sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one to come. Jesus sent these words back to John the Baptist: "Tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."

The evidence was abundantly clear: God had come back to dwell among his people. His power overflowed, and the message of his presence was again proclaimed. The old prophetic indictment and warning that the people were destroying the covenant had been replaced by the proclamation that God was fulfilling his

promise. The kingdom of God's saving rule was at hand. Jesus' message sounded just as clear as that of the prophets' of old. God wants his people for himself; there is no room for idolatry. "You must repent," Jesus said. God has no pleasure in religious formalism; what matters, said Jesus, is the heart. New covenant worshippers will worship in Spirit and in truth. God still hates social injustice. Jesus came to preach good news to the poor and to release the oppressed.

For the Jewish leader, this message served as a radical indictment of their lifestyle, beliefs, and position. They plotted to kill Jesus and put an end to his growing group of disciples. It all came to a head during a week of Passover celebration. Jesus assembled his twelve closest disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Jewish Passover. Knowing what was about to happen, he told them of his imminent death. Gathered around the Passover table for a meal to remember how God saved them from slavery in Egypt, Jesus changed the symbolic content of the typical Jewish Passover meal and made it a celebration of the new covenant. Jesus took the bread and broke it saying that it represented his body, which was about to be broken for many. He also poured the wine saying that it represented his blood, which was about to be shed for the forgiveness of sin.

Later that evening he went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. As he was praying, the Jewish leaders, escorted by a large number of soldiers and by Jesus' own disciple Judas, came out and took him captive. After an illegal trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Jesus stood before the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate for a Roman trial. Though he found him not guilty, he still gave in to the pressure of the Jewish leaders who had stirred up the crowd

against Jesus. Jesus was crucified on Friday-killed by the cruelest and most painful method of execution known to the Romans. That same day, when Jesus died, the pain of God, giving his own Son for the sins of human kind, became evident. The sun darkened and the temple's curtain, which separated the temple's holy area from its most holy area, tore from top to bottom. It was as if God had torn his cloths to express his own pain and suffering. At the same time, God had created open access into the place of his holy dwelling.

Jesus' death on the cross was not God's final word, however. By his sacrificial death, Jesus paid the price for the sins of humankind; opening the door for people again to enjoy the fellowship with God that sin had broken. Jesus died not just as a religious man but as the Son of God. God majestically and powerfully confirmed Jesus as his Son when Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. The resurrection vindicated Jesus' death as an act of God and verified his identity as the Son of God. As Paul would later say, without the resurrection faith in Jesus would have been meaningless. But, as it is, because he did rise, faith in Jesus means everything. It reestablished a saving relationship between God and humans who put their trust in him.

During a forty-day period after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples to ensure them of his continued presence and to give them instructions for the future. He would ascend to heaven, he explained; and while he was there, the disciples were to continue to spread his message. Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them everything that he had taught.

The ascension is necessary, Jesus continued, because "unless I go back to my Father, the Holy Spirit will not come to you" (see John 16:7).

The Spirit came ten days after the ascension of Jesus. It happened on the day that we now call Pentecost. The Spirit came with a power that enabled the ministry of Jesus to continue through his disciples. The Spirit brought the presence of God in a way that was unlimited by space and time.

After God's Holy Spirit had descended upon each of Jesus' followers, he gave them a boldness to preach the gospel. The gospel is the good news about God's new covenant through his Messiah Jesus with all people. The first time the disciples preached, people from everywhere, who were assembled in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival, heard the gospel and were moved to conversion—three thousand that first day. Before long the gospel spread far beyond Jerusalem, and the church became a powerful reality in the world.

This rapid growth of the church created a strong opposition. One of the primary opponents was a young Pharisee named Paul. In spite of his young age, he had gained great prominence among the Jewish leaders. One day, on his way to Damascus to track down and persecute more Christians, a powerful vision of the resurrected Jesus stopped him. This encounter radically convinced Paul of the truth of the Christian message, and it led him to conversion and baptism. After a season, a prominent church member named Barnabas, who was ministering in the church in Antioch, called on Paul to come and help him there.

This ministry in Antioch gave impetus to the conviction that God wanted the gospel to be preached to all people everywhere. Paul and Barnabas now left the church in Antioch to take a journey into Asia Minor to spread the good news. Coming back from this first journey, Paul and Barnabas found that some Pharisees, although they had acknowledged that Jesus had come from God, were vehemently opposed to their ministry. These so-called Judaizers preached that people could only become Christians if they also would keep the Law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas were infuriated! To them the new covenant was a covenant of Spirit and faith, not of Law and rituals. The so-called gospel of the Judaizers was no gospel at all.

To settle the matter, Paul and Barnabas went to talk to the leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem. In this meeting—after prayer, testimony, and conversation—it was determined that God did not require Gentiles (non-Jews) to become Jews before they could become Christians. By giving his Spirit to the Gentiles, God had already spoken on the matter, they concluded. Everyone who would trust in Jesus' death as atonement for human sin and who would recognize his resurrection as the manifestation of God's power over evil, belonged to God. The evidence that someone had become a Christian was the presence of God's Spirit, not the keeping of the Mosaic covenant. In this way, the meeting in Jerusalem became the starting point for a powerful mission enterprise that would spread the gospel throughout the world.

Paul made at least three missionary journeys, starting churches everywhere from the province of Galatia through Asia Minor to Europe. Paul worked tirelessly day and night, preaching, teaching, and writing letters to help the churches stay

on track and be strong in the face of opposition. Hostility was vehement from both within and without. Within the church, false teachers fired their malignant darts in an attempt to pull the infant church away from the gospel message Paul had preached. From outside the church, social and political pressures and the pagan culture attempted to crush the new and struggling fellowships. Although the gospel message withstood this animosity, opposition finally caught up with Paul himself who used his right as a Roman citizen to have his case tried before Caesar.

In Rome, Paul stayed under house arrest for two years where he was able to continue a teaching and writing ministry. After this imprisonment, he was probably released for a little while before being taken captive again and martyred during a heavy persecution launched against all Christians by the Roman emperor Nero. This persecution did not stop the spread of the gospel, however. Even when the persecution increased about twenty years later under the Roman emperor Domitian, who demanded that Christians call him lord (a title they reserved for Jesus alone), Rome could not stop the gospel. Willing to pay with their lives for the good news about Jesus Christ, Christians continued to preach about the grace of God and the presence of his kingdom.

The last book of the Bible speaks to the suffering that God's people often face. At a time when Christians served as prey for wild animals for the amusement of thousands of people at the coliseum in Rome, the book of Revelation gave Christians a glimpse of what was to come. Suffering will not last forever! God will honor his promise and vindicate his people. He will create a new heaven and a new earth where all evil will be removed. Those who

have received his Spirit and become a part of his people in this life will come to enjoy his full presence forever. The presence of God and the coming of his kingdom that is now experienced in part will then be experienced in full. Those who through faith in Jesus enjoy God's fellowship in this life will end up where humanity began, in the full presence of God where they will see him face-to-face. The story will end where it began—God and humans together in close fellowship. Why tell this story? We tell this story because it is more than a story, even more than just a true story. It is the story! It is a story that better than any other story makes sense of life. It gives coherence and structure to our understanding of the universe. It gives meaning to our experiences and direction to our decisions. It is a story that refuses apathy! It requests a hearing! It petitions to be internalized! It promises a life-changing encounter with God!

Our lives as human beings are made up of stories that have shaped, or are shaping, who we are. The story of the Bible has the power to make sense of all the other stories of your life. When it is internalized and it becomes your story, it gives meaning in the midst of meaninglessness and value in the midst of worthlessness. Your personal story will find grounding in creation, guidance in crises, re-formation in redemption, and direction in its destination. People become Christians when their own stories merge with, and are understood in the light of, God's story.