

The Bible as God's Story

I. ABOUT THE BIBLE

The Bible's Place in Christianity

Christianity and the Bible go together. Almost all Christian churches affirm positions that speak about the importance of Scripture. The Bible therefore plays a significant role in the faith and practice of all Christians. Here are at least three assertions about the Bible that most segments of Christianity would have no problem making.

- **The Bible Is Authoritative.** In other words, Christianity believes that God exercises his authority over his people through Scripture. That's not to say that the Bible is the only source of authority for Christians, but it is a crucial one. In fact, Anglicans and other Protestants believe that the Bible is the church's final authority on matters of faith and practice.
- **The Bible Is the Word of God.** Christians believe the Bible to be inspired by God. The term *inspiration* is used to describe the relationship between the divine and human roles in the writing of Scripture. Christians believe that the divine aspect of the Bible is inseparably and mysteriously interwoven into every verse.
- **The Bible Is the Words of Humans.** Inspiration also means that as God directed human authors to write Scripture, he did so in a way that incorporated their different abilities, experiences, styles, and cultural situations. Christians believe that the human aspect of the Bible is also interwoven into every verse.

The Parts of the Bible

Though typically bound together in one volume, it is important to remember that the Bible is not one book, but a library consisting of sixty-six separate books written...

- over a 1500-year time period
- by more than forty authors
- on three continents (Asia, Europe, Africa)
- in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek)
- in a variety of literary genres (narrative, poetry, letter, prophecy, etc.)

The sixty-six books of the Bible are divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament describes the outworking of the covenant God made with Israel.

Law (5)	History (12)	Wisdom (5)	Minor Prophets (12)
Genesis	Joshua	Job	Hosea
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Joel
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Amos
Numbers	1 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Obadiah
Deuteronomy	2 Samuel	Song of Songs	Jonah
	1 Kings		Micah
	2 Kings	Major Prophets (5)	Nahum
	1 Chronicles	Isaiah	Habakkuk
	2 Chronicles	Jeremiah	Zephaniah
	Ezra	Lamentations	Haggai
	Nehemiah	Ezekiel	Zechariah
	Esther	Daniel	Malachi

The New Testament describes the renewal of that covenant by Israel's Messiah.

Gospel (4)	Paul to Churches (9)	Paul to Friends (4)	General Letters (9)
Matthew	Romans	1 Timothy	Hebrews
Mark	1 Corinthians	2 Timothy	James
Luke	2 Corinthians	Titus	1 Peter
John	Galatians	Philemon	2 Peter
	Ephesians		1 John
History (1)	Philippians		2 John
Acts	Colossians		3 John
	1 Thessalonians		Jude
	2 Thessalonians		Revelation

But What Is the Bible?

Yes, the Bible is God's Word. Yes, the Bible is authoritative. Yes, the Bible is a two-part library consisting of sixty-six separate books. But as a whole, what is it? What are we reading? How can one make sense of the whole, and then how should that whole be primarily read? Here are some common ways people read the Bible as a whole.

- **Rulebook.** For some the Bible is a massive collection of laws to be used for prescribing right and wrong behavior. Yet while there are plenty of laws and commandments scattered throughout Scripture, it does not present itself primarily as a rulebook, or even as a manual for living.
- **Theology Book.** For others the Bible is like a puzzle of proof-texts that needs to be put together into a well-organized theological system. Yet while the Bible is indeed theological in nature, it does not present itself primarily as a theology book, or even as a list of propositions to be affirmed.
- **Devotional Guide.** For some the Bible is a devotional guide offering morsels of blessings and promises to help get through each day. Yet while there are plenty of promises scattered throughout Scripture, it does not present itself primarily as a devotional guide, or even a book of promises.

This class is going to make the case that the Bible as a whole presents itself as the true story of God and his intentions for his people living in his world.

II. THE CONCEPT OF STORY

A Story Provides Meaning

Stories have the power to provide meaning. Events, for example, only make sense in the context of a story. Phrases like “it’s going to rain” or “the two towers fell” are meaningless apart from an overarching storyline. People are also only known in the context of a story. The most natural way for two people to get to know one another is to tell their stories rather than provide a list of disconnected facts like height, weight, hair and eye color, or age.

A Grand Story (Worldview)

Stories not only have the ability to provide meaning for the smaller things of life like events and people, but also for life itself—for the entire world. The world itself only makes sense in the context of a story because only a story answers the most basic questions about life and existence.

- How did everything get here?
- Who am I?
- Where am I?
- What’s wrong with the world?
- What’s the remedy?
- How do I relate to the world?
- Where is history going?
- What role should I play?

A story that provides answers to these questions is called a worldview (also known as a metanarrative). There are many worldviews that compete for attention in public life. Here are a few examples.

- **Atheistic Naturalism.** The universe has always existed and so the world is a product of random chance and heading toward no particular destination.
- **Modernism.** History is steadily improving through human reason, liberal democracy, technological advancement, and scientific discovery toward a utopian existence for the entire world.
- **Pantheism.** Everything that exists is God, and so evil and pain are illusions, and human beings ultimately are meant to enter into an unconscious oneness with the God-universe.
- **Gnosticism.** The creation of the physical world was a mistake and is inherently evil; human beings are meant to escape it.

*“A story is the best way of talking
about the way the world actually is.”*

N. T. Wright

III. THE BIBLE AS STORY

A Biblical Worldview

A biblical worldview is what forms as one begins to treat the Bible as God's true story of the world. It is what happens when the biblical narrative becomes *the* grand story by which one makes sense of the world and their place in it, which will in turn invite and compel that person to make God's story their own, to participate with God in all that he is doing in the world. This is why it is so crucial for Christians to have a firm grip on the Bible's story.

"The Bible functions as the authoritative Word of God for us when it becomes the one basic story through which we understand our own experience and thought, and the foundation upon which we base our decisions and our actions."

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

A Summary of the Biblical Story

The primary theme of the Bible is the kingdom of God, that is, God's reign over all things. The Bible not only reveals God's intentions to exercise his glorious rule through his human beings, but it also reveals, in response to human rebellion, how God is working to reestablish his kingdom over creation through Israel's Messiah. This overarching narrative holds all the disparate pieces of the Bible together, and it can be divided into six acts.

- **Creation.** Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom over all things and appoints human beings to rule on his behalf as his image bearers, to fill the earth and develop his creation into a glorious civilization.
- **The Curse.** Tragically, human beings rebel against God as they seek to rule God's creation their own way, resulting in the curse of evil and death upon the world, which infects every aspect of God's good creation.
- **The Covenant.** God remains committed to his creation by initiating a covenant with Israel to undo the world's curse by being a blessing to all nations thereby reestablishing his kingdom, but Israel is continually unfaithful to the covenant.
- **The Christ.** In faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, God sends his Son as their Messiah to inaugurate and make possible the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.
- **The Church.** The work of Jesus results in the renewal of God's covenant and the creation of a transformed community called the church whose mission is to extend God's kingdom to every part of the world in the power of the Spirit.
- **New Creation.** With the return of Jesus to earth, God ultimately deals with evil and death, and glorifies human beings so that they reign with Christ over a renewed and flourishing creation—God's kingdom is finally restored.

IV. ABOUT THE CLASS

What Is This Class About?

The Story of the Bible is about seeing and understanding all the bits and pieces of the Bible as part of this one unified story of God to restore this broken world in and through Jesus Christ and his followers. Each lesson will focus on one of the six acts of the biblical narrative by explaining the key events and their significance for today.

- Lesson 1 The Bible as God's Story
- Lesson 2 Creation: God Establishes His Kingdom
- Lesson 3 The Curse: Humanity Rebels against God
- Lesson 4 The Covenant: God Begins to Reestablish His Kingdom
- Lesson 5 The Christ: Israel's King Inaugurates God's Kingdom
- Lesson 6 The Church: God's Kingdom Expands
- Lesson 7 New Creation: God's Kingdom Is Realized
- Lesson 8 Living Out God's Story Today

Why Is This Class Important?

When the Bible is read incorrectly, the bits and pieces of Scripture can easily be used to support an alternative story that Christians live out instead of the biblical one. *The Story of the Bible* seeks to alter this tendency by helping Christians form a biblical worldview based on the overarching narrative of Scripture around which they can orient their entire lives.

How Will I Get the Most out of the Class?

1. Attend at least six of the eight weekly meetings.
2. Complete one of the following assignments.
 - Write a one-page summary of the story of the Bible.
 - Walk through the class material with another person.
 - Illustrate the six acts of the biblical story.
3. Read one of the following books.
 - *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen (Baker, 2014) 270 pages
 - *The Story of God, the Story of Us: Getting Lost and Found in the Bible* by Sean Gladding (InterVarsity, 2010) 250 pages
 - *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* by James Choung (InterVarsity, 2008) 230 pages