

INTRODUCTION: SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Life is short and life is busy. It's very easy to miss the big picture. Some people spend their whole lives climbing up a ladder, only to discover far too late that the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall.

Nobody ever intends to neglect the things which really matter. We get caught in the headlights of a busy world, like a rabbit on a busy highway, and we freeze. We allow other people to dictate what should fill up our thinking time. A study conducted by the University of Southern California in 2011 suggests we are bombarded with enough information every day to fill the pages of 174 newspapers. It's no wonder that we shut down our senses and ignore many of the messages which cry out for our attention.

Most people want to discover the message of the Bible. The problem is simply that they are too busy. They view the Bible in the same way that I view Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: I know I ought to read it but, frankly, it just looks far too long. That's why I have written this book to help you, whether you are a believer or a non-believer who is simply curious about the book which has shaped so much of what is good in Western culture. As Richard Dawkins, who is certainly no lover of religion, told the King James Bible Trust in February 2010: *"We are a Christian culture. We come from a Christian culture, and not to know the King James Bible is to be, in some small way, barbarian."*

The Bible is unique among the writings of the world. It was written across 2,000 years by at least 44 different authors in 3 languages in 9 countries in 3

continents.¹ It speaks with the varied voices of kings and nomads and shepherds and generals and queens and mothers and poets and thinkers and fishermen – but it also speaks with one consistent voice from start to finish. The reason we get confused when we read the Bible is that we miss the big picture of this start-to-finish story. We are like the person who comes into a room halfway through a movie and then starts complaining that the plot is hard to follow. That’s why I have summarized the overarching message of the Bible’s 66 books, 1,189 chapters and 31,102 verses into just 100 pages for you. I want to help you to see the big picture in the world’s greatest story so that you can discover your own place in the story too.

So get ready for a fast-paced journey through the book which has sold more copies, created more leaders, inspired more poetry, shaped more laws and changed more lives than any other book in history. Get ready to be challenged and encouraged and enlightened and provoked by the big picture of its message. The German monk and Bible scholar Martin Luther claimed that *“The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”* My prayer is that, as you read this book, the living message of the Bible will captivate your own heart too.

Phil Moore

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¹ The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, with the exception of a few chapters in Daniel and Ezra and one verse in Jeremiah, which are all in Aramaic. The New Testament was written entirely in Greek.

PART 1 CREATURES

GENESIS 1–11 CREATION TO 2200 BC

The Bible begins with God. It's very simple. It doesn't try to convince us that God exists. It doesn't feel it has to. It simply informs us that *"In the beginning God..."*

These first four words of the Bible launch into a chapter which celebrates the incomparable greatness of the Creator God. Genesis 1 tells us ten times that *"God said,"* and it informs us that as a result *"it was so."* God doesn't sweat or struggle to create the world. Even though cosmologists tell us that there are at least 170 billion galaxies in the universe, Genesis 1:16 only uses two Hebrew words when it tells us that *"He also made the stars."* The Bible begins with a mighty declaration that God is God and we are not. God is the Creator and we are his creatures. That's the big picture.

Humans only step onto the stage of world history as God is putting the finishing touches to his work of creation. He creates Adam and Eve in his own image,

but what really strikes us is how very different they are from their Creator. The Lord never grows tired or weary (Isaiah 40:28), but humans do. We have to stop at least three times a day to eat food and recharge our strength. God never needs to sleep (Psalm 121:4), but we do. Even if we manage to pull the occasional all-nighter, we always end up paying for it later. The rhythm of our lives cries out that God is God and we are not. We need to spend half of our short lives sleeping, eating and relaxing. That's not just weird. It is deliberate.

Genesis 1 underlines this difference by reminding us six times that the Hebrew day began and ended with nightfall. It is a statement that, by the time we get to work in the morning, God has already punched a twelve-hour shift without us! In case we miss this, God decrees that the seventh day of creation will be a day of rest, a Sabbath. He does not do so because he is tired from six days of exertion. Jesus tells us in Mark 2:27 that *"The Sabbath was made for humans"*. God wanted Adam and Eve to begin their lives resting in a garden they had not planted, picking fruit they had not grown and enjoying food they had not cultivated. The weekly Sabbath would remind them to *"Be still, and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10). God is the Creator and we are his creatures. That's the message of Part 1 of the Bible.

This was the issue which the Devil targeted when he disguised himself as a snake and came to tempt Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. They should have known better than to trust a talking snake, but the Devil's

message was one which people always like to hear. He encouraged them to play at being God.

The Devil encouraged Adam and Eve to doubt God's Word, asking them, "*Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?*" He encouraged them to distrust God's character, maligning his motives by suggesting that "*God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.*" Finally he denied God's Word outright: "*You will not die.*" When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they fell under the curse of sin. The bitter aftertaste of the Devil's food was death and sickness and stress and pain and toil – the very opposite of relaxing in the perfect world which God had created.

This sets the scene for the rest of Genesis 1–11. The human population grows and people choose whether to rest in the fact that they are God's dependent creatures or to fight against him in order to become little gods themselves. We can tell that we are still caught up in the struggle from the way that we react when we read the words "dependent creatures". We get offended by the suggestion that we are dependent upon anyone, but that's precisely the point. We could not survive an hour without the breath or heartbeat which God gives us. Even when we play at being little gods, we are only able to do so because the Creator God sustains us in his patient love.

Adam and Eve try to cover over their sin by making clothes from fig leaves, but they can no more save themselves than create themselves. The fully clothed Adam confesses to God that "*I was afraid*

because I was naked." They only find forgiveness when the Creator God reveals that he is the Saviour God too. He kills an innocent animal – the first death in the Garden of Eden – and covers their nakedness with clothing made from the hide of the world's first blood sacrifice.

Adam and Eve teach their children that this is how sin must always be forgiven. When their eldest son Cain tries to impress God with the work of his own hands, God points to his younger brother Abel's sacrifice of an innocent lamb and asks him: *"Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"*¹ Cain is faced with a choice: Will he accept that God is God and he is not? He prefers to be a self-assertive murderer than a dependent creature. He kills his brother and founds a dynasty of rebels who try to act like little human gods.

Cain's dynasty is known as "the sons of men". It culminates in the self-centred boasting of Lamech: *"I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me."* Their rage against God turns into rage against anyone who reminds them that the universe does not revolve around them at all.

But Adam and Eve have another son named Seth. His dynasty is known as "the sons of God" because they *"began to call on the name of the Lord."* We are told that Enoch *"walked faithfully with God"* and that Noah *"was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God."* These events happened

¹ This sacrificial lamb pointed to the death of Jesus on the cross. That's why Jesus in Luke 11:50–51 calls Abel the first prophet, despite the fact that Abel does not speak a single word in the Bible.

many thousands of years ago but they are just as relevant today. Seth's family were the first believers, the first to confess gladly that God is God and we are not. God prized their worship so highly that he gave them a starring role in Part 1 of the Bible's story.

Then, in Genesis 6, something terrible happens: *"The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose."* Seth's family stopped worshipping God as dependent creatures and married into Cain's self-assertive family.

"I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them," God told Noah. *"Make yourself an ark."* It seemed like a ridiculous command, an impossible command, but Noah believed God and obeyed. In contrast to the violent self-assertiveness, self-centredness and self-worship of his neighbours, we are told twice that *"Noah did everything just as God commanded him."* Once Noah had built his massive boat, God saved his entire family by ensuring that it floated. Genesis 7:16 reminds us that he is the Saviour God by telling us that *"the Lord shut him in."*

Nowadays many people laugh at the story of Noah and his ark, but to do so ignores the fact that a version of this story appears in the ancient writings of all the world's great cultures – as far back as the Mesopotamian epics of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh and the Ancient Greek story of Deucalion, as far west as the Aztecs of Central America, and as far east as the Aborigines of Australia. It is a historical event which teaches us three vital lessons at the start of the Bible.

First, it shows us that God takes it very seriously when we sin by pretending to be little gods. Second, it warns us that God has set a judgment day for sin. In 2 Peter 3 we are warned us that *“in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” Jesus promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word... the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”* Third, it assures us that God has made a way for sinful people to be forgiven. Men and women who try to be like God will be destroyed, but God became a carpenter like Noah so that whoever trusts in the blood of Jesus can be saved.

If anybody might have been tempted to get stressed out and over-busy then it was Noah when he led his family out of the ark after the Flood. The whole of human civilization had been destroyed and he was in charge of its reconstruction. He had the mother of all to-do lists. Yet the first thing he did when he stepped out of the ark was absolutely nothing. He resolved to live as God had always intended humans to live. He put down his hammer and his axe and he lifted up his empty hands to God in worship.

We are in desperate need of the message of Genesis 1–11. We belong to one of the most stressed-out and self-centred generations in human history. God invites us at the start of the Bible to make a choice

between Adam's fig leaves and God's blood sacrifice, between Cain's hard work and Abel's faith, and between Lamech's pride and Noah's obedience.

Will we act like little gods or will we accept that we are creatures whose happiness is bound up in the fact that God is God and we are not?