

JON NIELSON

# TRACING GOD'S STORY

AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

“How I wish I had grasped biblical theology long before I began to learn about it in my forties! What Jon Nielson has written in *Tracing God’s Story* is a concise account of the story the divine author has written in Scripture. While this book is economical with words, it is generous with insight. It presents the story simply but not simplistically. I look forward to recommending it to those who long to have a more solid grip on the Bible’s storyline.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, teacher, Biblical Theology Workshop for Women

“I am so grateful for the work of Jon Nielson. He continues to provide the church with outstanding material for the study of the Bible and theology. One of the things that makes Nielson’s work rather distinctive is how well he makes the study of the Bible and theology accessible to a wide audience. In *Tracing God’s Story*, Nielson does for biblical theology what he did for systematic theology in his excellent *Knowing God’s Truth*. Beginning with creation, he traces God’s acts of redemption all the way through to the consummation of the age. Along the way, he invites the reader to engage with the material devotionally. I am excited to get this book into the hands of members of the church I serve.”

**Todd Pruitt**, Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia; Cohost, *Mortification of Spin*

“As in a novel, you can’t just dip into a page of the Bible and get the gist. Through all the diverse writings, what’s the through line? This is an outstanding and accessible introduction to the plot that keeps biblical history moving from Genesis to Revelation. I highly recommend this book.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Core Christianity*

“In *Tracing God’s Story*, Jon Nielson takes us on a gallop through the pages of Scripture to show us how the whole grand story of redemption fits together. Neither too shallow nor too deep, this book is written at the perfect level for lay leaders in the church seeking to gain a better understanding of God’s covenant faithfulness to his people across the ages.”

**Chris Polski**, Pastor, Trinity Church Kirkwood, Missouri; Visiting Instructor in Applied Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary; and his wife, **Katie Polski**, Director of Music Ministries, Trinity Church Kirkwood; author; speaker

“In *Tracing God’s Story*, Jon Nielson presents a clear, coherent, and compelling account of the metanarrative of redemptive history, skillfully weaving the threads of God’s own character with his acts of creation and providence into a tapestry of biblical theology. Not only does he provide the appropriate historical, literary, and redemptive contexts, but he also supplies the reader with cogent and salient application. I’m excited to use this resource in my church for many years to come!”

**Brian Cosby**, Senior Pastor, Wayside Presbyterian Church, Signal Mountain, Tennessee; Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

“Understanding the great thematic threads woven throughout the pages of Scripture, accompanied with a view of the overarching grand story, grants Bible readers deeper delight in God’s work and person. Jon Nielson has provided a resource that helps Bible readers do this very thing! *Tracing God’s Story*, like Nielson’s first volume in the Theology Basics series, is clear and simple without being simplistic. My family greatly benefited from the first volume, and I can’t wait to put this second volume into the hands of my teenagers.”

**Jason Helopoulos**, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan; author, *The Promise*; *Covenantal Baptism*; and *A Neglected Grace*

“One of the biggest challenges believers find in accessing and reading Scripture is understanding its narrative and cohesion as one unified story. Jon Nielson provides a clear, simple, and thorough overview of the story of Scripture that will make the Bible more accessible and meaningful to believers of any age. A very worthwhile and valuable resource.”

**Cameron Cole**, Founding Chairman, Rooted Ministry; author, *Therefore I Have Hope* and *Heavenward*

“In *Tracing God’s Story*, Jon Nielson helps Christians read their Bible cover to cover, with Jesus as the cohesive center. Nielson’s work is clearly supported by the best of biblical scholarship, but his writing is accessible to anyone. This book succeeds as an introductory biblical theology volume that not only informs but also inspires. If you are looking for an accessible volume on biblical theology that will get you into the word—while getting the word into you—look no further than *Tracing God’s Story*.”

**Trent Casto**, Senior Pastor, Covenant Church of Naples, Florida; author, *2 Corinthians* (Reformed Expository Commentary Series)

## **TRACING GOD'S STORY**

**The Theology Basics Series by Jon Nielson**

*Knowing God's Truth: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*

*Knowing God's Truth Workbook: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*

*Tracing God's Story: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*

*Tracing God's Story Workbook: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*

# **TRACING GOD'S STORY**

An Introduction to Biblical Theology

**JON NIELSON**

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*To my wife, Jeanne,  
who has walked faithfully with me  
“in sickness and in health.”*





# CONTENTS

Introduction *xi*

1 What Is Biblical Theology? *1*

## PART 1: THE OLD TESTAMENT

2 God's Creation and a Crisis: Part 1 *19*

3 God's Creation and a Crisis: Part 2 *37*

4 God's Promise of a People: Part 1 *55*

5 God's Promise of a People: Part 2 *73*

6 God's People Grow: Part 1 *93*

7 God's People Grow: Part 2 *113*

8 God's Kingdom—Rise and Fall: Part 1 *133*

9 God's Kingdom—Rise and Fall: Part 2 *153*

10 God's People—Captive and Coming Home: Part 1 *173*

11 God's People—Captive and Coming Home: Part 2 *191*

Intermission: Between the Old and New Testaments *213*

## PART 2: THE NEW TESTAMENT

12	God's Salvation	221
13	God's Church: Part 1	255
14	God's Church: Part 2	275
15	God's Eternity: Part 1	297
16	God's Eternity: Part 2	317
	Conclusion	339
	General Index	341
	Scripture Index	351

# INTRODUCTION

This book is the second in a three-part series called “Theology Basics.” The first book in this series, *Knowing God’s Truth*, is a basic introduction to the discipline of *systematic theology*, which simply refers to an organized approach to gathering together our beliefs about God, humanity, sin, salvation, and other subjects—all according to God’s revelation in Scripture. The third book in the series, *Understanding God’s Word*, will provide some basic tools for *hermeneutics*—that is, for interpreting and applying the Bible faithfully.

This book, *Tracing God’s Story*, is an introduction to the discipline of *biblical theology*. In other words, we’re going to take the entire Bible as one united book—one big “story”—and study it as one connected narrative of God and his saving work in the world. We will begin in the book of Genesis and end with the book of Revelation. My prayer is that by the end of this book you will have a better sense of how the entire story of the Bible hangs together as a beautiful, united narrative of the creating, saving, and restoring work of our mighty God.

Before we begin, let me say a word about the organization of the chapters. Here’s what you should be ready for:

## INTRODUCTION

- Near the beginning of each chapter, you'll find suggested verses for you to memorize—verses linked to that chapter's topic. These memory sections are marked by the word "Remember!" Whether or not you memorize these verses is up to you, but doing so would be a great way to intentionally hide God's word in your heart as you learn more about his story.
- About ten times per chapter, you'll be instructed to "Read!" a biblical passage. After each reading, you'll find an explanation and summary of that passage. These sections will make the most sense (and be most beneficial to you) if you take time to read the passages themselves. You won't read every word of Scripture along with this book—not even close! But the reading that accompanies each section is integral to the aim of this book: to acquaint you with the story of the Bible from beginning to end.
- At the end of each chapter, you'll find a quick recap of the portion of God's story you've just studied. Then you'll see a "Pray!" section. This is an opportunity for you to talk to God for thirty to sixty seconds about what you've just learned. I encourage you to make these prayer times a priority.

I hope that *Tracing God's Story* will help you "put your Bible together" as you come to understand and treasure God's revelation to us, his people.

## Chapter 1

# WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

Biblical theology is a discipline that seeks to discover theology (truth about God and his work) through the gradual and progressive revelation of his saving plan in the story of the Bible. This is often done by tracing certain themes or ideas through Scripture from beginning to end—Genesis to Revelation.

The core conviction of those who practice the discipline of biblical theology is that the Bible is a unified work—a book inspired by one divine author (God) and given to human beings to help them understand his broad saving plan, which ultimately was accomplished through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. We will see shortly how Jesus himself pointed us toward this way of understanding Scripture.

So our goal in this book is to do biblical theology. We will trace God’s story of redemption as it is revealed to us progressively in the revelation of Scripture. We will begin in Genesis and end in Revelation.

For purposes of clear organization and to guide our study, we’ll make our way through the Bible in eight “scenes.” Here is the plan for these scenes:

*Scene 1: God’s Creation and a Crisis (chaps. 2–3)*

*Scene 2: God’s Promise of a People (chaps. 4–5)*

*Scene 3: God's People Grow (chaps. 6–7)*

*Scene 4: God's Kingdom—Rise and Fall (chaps. 8–9)*

*Scene 5: God's People—Captive and Coming Home (chaps. 10–11)*

*Scene 6: God's Salvation (chap. 12)*

*Scene 7: God's Church (chaps. 13–14)*

*Scene 8: God's Eternity (chaps. 15–16)*

As you can see, the titles given to these sections all begin with “God.” The Bible is *his* story—the connected account of his marvelous saving work in the world that he created. By the end of this book, you should have a clearer understanding of the unity of Scripture and the beautiful story of God's redemption through his Son, Jesus Christ, which is revealed in all the pages of his inspired word.

### Remember!

Take some time to get acquainted with your suggested memory verses for this opening chapter:

*Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. (Acts 2:29–32)*

## FOUNDATIONS FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

We will begin by discussing some foundational arguments for biblical theology. In other words, we are going to be asking this question: Why do we believe that this is a valid way to study the Bible? This is

an important question to answer because, as we will learn in the next chapter, not everyone agrees that this is a valid approach! So I will seek to explain just a few of the key foundations that establish biblical theology as the right way to engage with Scripture.

### Jesus's Example

One answer to the above question is that Jesus read and interpreted the Old Testament in this way. When we practice biblical theology, we are following the lead of Jesus in the way that he looked at and applied Scripture.



### READ!

*Take a few minutes to read Luke 24:13–27—the account of Jesus walking and talking with two men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection from the dead.*

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were struggling to understand the events that had just taken place. Jesus, the man they had followed as the Messiah, had been killed. They were sad and discouraged because it seemed that he had failed.

Jesus confronted these men based on Scripture. He told them that it was “necessary” for the Christ to suffer and die (Luke 24:26); Scripture had told them that would happen! Then he did something amazing: Jesus opened the Old Testament Scriptures for these men—right there on the road—and explained to them the “things concerning himself” (v. 27). Luke tells us that he began with Moses (the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy) and then moved into the prophetic writings in order to show them how the Old Testament—all of it—ultimately pointed to him.

This is a crucial passage for helping us understand how Jesus interpreted Scripture. He saw himself as the main character—the one to whom the entire Old Testament pointed. Thus, biblical theology is legitimate. It is right to see the Bible as telling one great story that has its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus.



We can draw a few conclusions:

*The Bible—all of it—is about Jesus.* That is not an overstatement. We can really say, according to what we see from Jesus in Luke 24, that the Bible is ultimately all about him. The Old Testament points forward to him, shows the need for him, and explains what he was going to do for God's people. The New Testament makes Jesus's work clear and plain. The Bible is about Jesus.

*We cannot rightly understand the Old Testament without understanding the work of Jesus.* In other words, it is bad scholarship to read the Old Testament without looking forward to the work of Jesus—the Messiah—that the Old Testament anticipates! This is what Jesus would have said. He called the men on the road to Emmaus “slow of heart” because they did not understand all that the Old Testament Scriptures had been teaching about him and his work. If we miss Jesus in the Old Testament, we simply have not studied it correctly!

*We should never study the Bible without talking about Jesus.* Finally, we can conclude with this important point: to study any part of the Bible without referencing Jesus—the central character of the Bible—does not do the Bible justice. We have studied it incorrectly. We need to frame our discussion of each passage of Scripture in terms of its place in the great story—a story that has its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus's “sermon” on the road to Emmaus lays an important foundation regarding biblical theology. How wonderful it would be to have that entire sermon recorded for us! Jesus took time to explain to the two men, from Moses and the Prophets, all the things about him in the Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, Jesus himself used “biblical theology” to see the connection between the Old Testament Scriptures and his work through his death and resurrection.

## The Apostles' Preaching

Another foundation for biblical theology is the example of Jesus's apostles. We will look at just one example of the teaching of the apostles about Jesus in relation to the Old Testament. We will consider the passage from which this chapter's suggested memory verses come: Acts 2:14–41 (Peter's sermon to the crowd at Pentecost). In this passage, we will see how Peter explained the work of Jesus from Psalm 16—a psalm written by King David.



### READ!

*Read Acts 2:14–41—the full account of Peter's great sermon at Pentecost.*

Just as Jesus did biblical theology on the road to Emmaus, his apostles did biblical theology as well.

In Acts 2, Peter delivered a sermon to the crowd at Pentecost, just after the Holy Spirit had descended with power on the disciples, enabling them to share the gospel with people in many different languages. In this sermon, Peter used Old Testament Scriptures—specifically the Psalms and the words of the prophet Joel—to show what was really happening: God's promised Spirit was being poured out as Joel promised would happen in conjunction with David's descendant being raised from the dead and crowned as King (Ps. 16).

This, then, is another key passage for helping us see that biblical theology, according to Jesus *and* his apostles, is a good, right, and legitimate way to study the Bible. In fact, according to Peter, it is really the *only* way to understand the Bible correctly. We do not “get” Joel unless we see how his words were fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. We do not “get” David, in Psalm 16, if we do not see the beautiful way that his words were fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter, an apostle, gives us another clear foundation for biblical theology in his wonderful sermon in Acts 2.

## Old Testament “Pointers”

We can find a third important foundation for biblical theology through studying a passage from the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 8, you will see that even the pictures, roles, and practices of the Old Testament are meant to point forward to the role and work of Jesus Christ as the Messiah.



### READ!

*Read Hebrews 8—a rich passage that explains the priestly ministry of Jesus by contrasting it with the priestly ministry of the Levites in the Old Testament.*

We could have selected any one of a great number of passages from Hebrews to illustrate this foundation for biblical theology. This book gives many examples of the ways that Old Testament pictures, practices, and roles ultimately point forward to the far greater work of Jesus Christ as the great Savior and King of God’s people. In fact, the whole message of the book of Hebrews could be summed up as “Jesus is *better*.” He is better than all the systems of the Levitical priesthood, and his death is better than any other sacrifice that has ever been made!

In other words, the biblical theological foundation that we can take from Hebrews 8 is that not only did Jesus and his apostles do biblical theology, but the pictures and roles of the Old Testament *themselves* demand a more perfect fulfillment in the work of Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

In this specific passage, we see the author of Hebrews (whom we cannot identify) showing us this principle in the concept and role of the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. He describes Jesus as the true “high priest” of God’s people—the one who is “seated at the right hand” of God in heaven (Heb. 8:1). We learn about Jesus’s priesthood through the role of human priests throughout history, who offered sacrifices to God for the sins of his people. Their work was meant to be a picture of Jesus’s final and perfect work as the great high priest of God’s people. Here is how the author of Hebrews puts it: “They [human priests] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (v. 5). He is arguing that the Old Testament priesthood was *intentionally* set up by

God to partly resemble the final saving work of Jesus Christ, the true high priest and final sacrifice for God's people.

So in light of Hebrews 8, we should look at passages from the Old Testament with the following assumptions:

- *God intentionally designed Old Testament rituals to point us to Christ.* This is clearly the argument of the author of Hebrews. The way that God set up the Levitical priesthood was not random. It was meant to show us our need for Christ's work and to teach God's people about the final salvation that was coming in God's Son.
- *We can learn more about Christ and his work by understanding the Old Testament.* A careful study of the priestly duties and functions can teach us about what Jesus accomplished for sinners on the cross.
- *Therefore, all of Scripture is valuable for showing us the beauty of the gospel.* This point flows out of the last one—biblical theology reminds us that every part of the Bible is valuable. It is all from God, and it is all meant to show us Christ in all his beauty, glory, and saving work.

So Hebrews teaches us about the Old Testament pictures *themselves*. Along with the prophecies and predictions, they are meant to make Christ visible and real to us as we read and study them.

### The Unity of the Bible

There is one final foundation for biblical theology that we should consider: the connection between the way the Bible begins and the way it ends. This connection is yet another “proof” for the legitimacy of the discipline of biblical theology.



#### **READ!**

*Read Revelation 21:9–22:5.*

This passage from Revelation gives us a picture of the very good end of God's great story. It shows us the final dwelling place of God with

his redeemed people—the holy city, also described as the new heaven and new earth, a perfect, eternal place.

As we examine this passage, one interesting point that surfaces is how so much of it is connected to all that has come before in the biblical story. Consider the following pictures that appear both in Revelation and earlier in the Bible:

- The *tree of life* shows up in the holy city (Rev. 22:2). We remember that tree from Genesis 2; God planted it in the garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve ate freely of it before the fall. After the fall, though, they were prevented from eating its fruit. At the end of the story, then, the tree returns, and God's people can eat of it again.
- The *river* shows up again, flowing through the eternal city of God (Rev. 22:1–2). We remember that there were glorious rivers flowing through the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10–14), watering the plants and giving life to all the creatures that lived there. Here is another connection between the beginning and the end of this great story.
- The temple also shows up at the end (Rev. 21:22). But it is not a physical temple, as in the days of Solomon. In fact, there is no temple at all in this heavenly city; God himself is the temple, because he dwells with and relates directly to his people. In a way, the entire city has become God's great temple—his great meeting place with his people.

So as we look at how the ending of the Bible story contains pictures that we can gather along the way, we begin to again see an important foundation for biblical theology: the Bible story ends in a way that relates to all of what has come before. There are echoes of Genesis in Revelation, as well as pictures and events that remind us of every part of the story of God's saving work in the lives of his people in the world.

When we read Revelation in this way and see how it is so closely connected with all that has come before in the Bible story (Old Testament and New Testament), it is not very difficult to see that the Bible really does

come to us as one unified story of God's great saving work in the world, a work that is centered on his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible ends with echoes of how it began; this is God's great story, and it hangs together perfectly.

Luke 24, Acts 2, Hebrews 8, and Revelation 21–22 offer us solid foundations for biblical theology. Hopefully you have been encouraged by seeing how Jesus and his apostles understood the Old Testament as pointing forward to the saving work of Christ, with the Bible as one connected story of God's great redemption plan!

## THE VALUE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Now that we have considered some foundations of biblical theology, we should consider why this approach to understanding the Scriptures is worthwhile. We will discuss the value of biblical theology as a discipline.



### READ!

*Read Luke 4:16–30—the account of Jesus teaching in the synagogue at his hometown of Nazareth.*

In general, biblical theology can be contrasted with two other forms of theology that scholars practice:

- *Systematic theology* is “systematized,” usually through categories of organization. Students of systematic theology choose a certain doctrine—the church, for example—and seek to form a systematic theology of it by looking at many Scripture passages that teach about the doctrine of the church. They are not necessarily concerned with the progressive revealing of the salvation of God or the unfolding story of the Bible. They are forming doctrines, organized in categories.
- *Historical theology* traces theological developments of thought throughout the centuries. Historical theologians usually become very well acquainted with theological viewpoints at different times in the history of the church. They study key figures such

as Augustine, John Calvin, and Martin Luther, and they seek to understand the development of theological thought over time.

While both systematic and historical theology are incredibly valuable, biblical theology offers some uniquely valuable benefits. Here are just a few:

- Biblical theology is most helpful in understanding the “big picture” of the storyline of the Bible. Since biblical theological study moves through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, it offers the best opportunity to get to know Scripture as it developed.
- Biblical theology allows us to study the Bible as it is revealed to us—not in systematic categories, but in books—in one developing story.
- Biblical theology helps students see the centrality of the gospel in not just the New Testament but all of Scripture.
- Biblical theology helps us remember that the Bible tells the unified story of the work of one God in one world throughout all of history.

As you can see, there are some unique benefits to the particular discipline that we are engaging with in this book.

### THE “JOURNEY” OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical theology is indeed a discipline. In order to practice it well, you need to have a picture of the full “journey” that you must take, especially if you wish to avoid certain pitfalls.



#### READ!

*Read John 5:39.*

Even some Bible scholars who believe deeply in the inspiration of Scripture find fault with people who “get to Jesus” from the Old Testament in ways that do “damage” to the history of the Bible—the actual

places, people, and situations that are described. Not every tree in the Old Testament points to the cross, and just because something in an Old Testament story is described as “red” doesn’t mean it’s a specific prophecy about the blood of Jesus. Some people have sought to find Jesus in ways that illegitimately twist the biblical text to mean things it never meant. Because of such mistakes, we are going to seek to expose some of the problematic ways that people do biblical theology by failing to make the full journey of studying the Bible faithfully, looking to the gospel, and then bringing the text to bear in a powerful way on the Christian life today.

*Step 1—Text to context.* The first step of the journey of good biblical theological study is traveling from the text itself to the historical and cultural context from which the text emerges. People seeking to use a passage of Scripture in biblical theology often completely ignore this step. They almost act as if Moses, David, or the ancient Israelites were not real people doing real things in real places in history; they simply move directly from the passage to Jesus Christ.

Instead, this step should involve some careful digging into the details of the text—examining the historical situation, truly understanding the story, and getting to the bottom of the reality of the passage. Until we really understand the biblical text in its context, we are not ready to see its place in the big story of the Bible.

*Step 2—Context to Christ.* The next step is to move from the historical context of the text itself to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection were the very central work in human salvation, and therefore the story of the Bible. We have to make this part of the journey after we work hard to understand the historical context and situation of Old Testament passages.

The key is finding the valid road to Jesus Christ from any given text. We can abuse Old Testament passages if we just “jump” to Jesus in random ways. The goal is to see the Bible as one grand story of God’s



saving work in the world; identify where any specific passage is in that progressive revelation of this saving work; and trace ahead to Jesus on the trajectory that the passage itself provides. This is not always easy to do; we will work on this in this book.

*Step 3—Christ to you.* Finally, truly Christian biblical theology cannot stop with simply “getting to Christ.” That would make it purely academic—a lecture about how the Old Testament points to Christ. The final step of biblical theology—and of Bible study in general—is to see how any given biblical text applies to the Christian life today. Does the text demand that we repent of sin? Does it require us to worship Jesus as God’s perfect King? Does the text call for obedience and faithfulness to God’s word? The path to Jesus that we have taken should help us see how the text should be rightly applied to our lives today as Christians. Bible study that is about knowing God, not just knowing *about* him, will always conclude with this important step.

If we fail to take this entire journey in our study of biblical theology, we will almost certainly fall into one or more mistakes when trying to understand what the Bible means. If we miss “text to context,” we will ignore important historical details and end up with a generic, misleading “impression” of a text. If we miss “context to Christ,” we will ignore how each story points us toward the central theme in all Scripture. And if we miss “Christ to you,” we will fail to properly apply the meaning of Scripture to our lives as Christians.

### **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL**

Biblical theology is especially useful for helping us understand and believe the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for God’s sinful people—the gospel.



#### **READ!**

*Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–4—the clear summary of the gospel that Paul preached to the Corinthians.*

Many people—even many Christians—think of the gospel as the brief message that we must believe in order to get in to heaven someday. They see it as the “ABC’s” of faith—the first step toward moving on to bigger and better aspects of the Christian life. But as we look at Scripture, especially through the lens of biblical theology, we begin to see that the gospel—the good news of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ—is much bigger than the ABC’s of faith. The gospel is huge; it is the center of the Christian faith and life! That’s why biblical theology is so helpful; it helps us better understand the gospel, which helps us live the Christian life more faithfully.

Here are a few ways that biblical theology can help expand and inform our understanding of this “big” gospel.

*Biblical theology explains the fullness of the gospel.* We would not fully understand the amazing nature of Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross if we did not have all the records of the blood sacrifices of animals in books like Exodus and Leviticus. We would not understand the fullness of God’s wrath against sin that was poured out on Christ if we did not have evidence of his wrath in the great flood or his judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. We would not as fully understand our guilt before God if we did not have the witness of the prophet Hosea, whose unfaithful wife was a vivid picture of the religious “whoring” of God’s people after idols and sinful practices. The Old Testament, when studied in a biblical theological way, shows us the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, revealing all that he fulfilled through his death for sin and his resurrection from the dead.

*Biblical theology explains the centrality of the gospel.* A careful study of the progressive revealing of God’s saving work in the world begins to show us how central the gospel must be to a right understanding of all of Scripture. Through a biblical theological perspective, we begin to see that the Old Testament cannot be rightly understood without its proper fulfillment in—and connection to—the gospel. When we see the Bible as one connected story written by God and focusing on the climax of

his work in Jesus Christ, we begin to see how every part of this story ultimately makes sense only as it relates to Jesus. There is simply no other way of bringing together the sixty-six books of the Bible; they make sense as they center around the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

*Biblical theology explains the progressive revealing of the mystery of the gospel.* Finally, the discipline of biblical theology makes sense of the way in which God reveals the mystery of his gospel progressively—that is, in gradual steps throughout history. While salvation comes by faith alone at every point of history (we see this in Abraham, who was counted “righteous” by God simply by believing his word; Rom. 4:3), the fullness of God’s salvation in Jesus the Messiah has been gradually revealed and made clearer and clearer over time. The best way to really understand this process, and to study each point along the way, is to engage Scripture through the discipline of biblical theology.

Hopefully, as you study biblical theology in this book, you will understand the gospel in a fuller and clearer way than you ever have before.

### **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY**

Not only can biblical theology expand, broaden, and explain a right view of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it can have a powerful and real effect on you—in your personal study and reading of the Bible. The goal of this book, you see, is not simply to help you grow in an academic understanding of the Bible. It is for you personally to grow in your understanding of your part in God’s story and saving plan.



### **READ!**

*Read Psalm 16—the psalm that Peter referenced in his sermon in Acts 2, the source for your memory verses for this chapter.*

Biblical theology should have an impact on *you*—the way you read the Bible and apply it to your life in the right ways. What specific effects should we expect as we become more familiar with biblical theology?

*Biblical theology helps you “put the Bible together.”* For many Christians (and perhaps for you), the Bible appears to be a collection of books that have been bound up together in the same cover but have no apparent connection with one another. It can almost seem ridiculous that the book of Judges is bound in the same book as the Gospel of John!

But biblical theology helps you “put the Bible together” in a unified way in your mind and heart. Tracing the story of God’s work in the world, culminating in Jesus Christ, helps you understand the connections between Judges and John—and all the other books. Studying the Bible as one story with one author and one hero helps you see the unity of Scripture; this, in turn helps you better understand each part, as well.

*Biblical theology shows you Jesus in all of Scripture.* Biblical theology also helps us see how every part of the Bible either points to or explains Jesus—in his life, death, and resurrection. When we take seriously what Jesus says in Luke 24 (and John 5:39—look it up!), we begin to see that the Old Testament accounts truly demand the work of Jesus with anticipation; they show us the need for redemption, forgiveness, and salvation. In fact, some of them even foreshadow what Christ’s work would look like! Biblical theology helps us see each part of the Bible in its proper role in the development of God’s revelation of the mystery of salvation through his Son.

*Biblical theology places you in the story.* Finally, the study of biblical theology best helps you—as a follower of God today—place yourself as part of this same story of God’s work in the world, a work that has been going on since his creation of Adam and Eve. Through studying the Bible as one great story, with one author and one Savior, we begin to see our own place in that story. We are living in the same scene of the story—the scene I’m calling “God’s Church” (see chaps. 13–14)—as God’s people who followed Jesus during the first days of the early church. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we can become part of the people that God has formed through all times and in all places. We begin to

realize that we really can know and worship the God of Abraham and Moses, and that we will share eternal life with Jacob, David, and Daniel.

Hopefully you now see the difference that biblical theology can make for you as you read and study the Bible on your own. It really can change the way you look at God's word!

### REVIEW

In this chapter, we've sought to be clear on our definition of biblical theology as contrasted with other theological disciplines. We've seen Jesus's own use of biblical theology, along with that of the apostles, who all viewed God's word as one big unified story with a climax in the person and work of Christ. Christians can have confidence in God's inspired word, knowing that it is given to us by God as one united story of his redeeming work in the world through Christ. It's good—and legitimate—to study the Bible in this way.



### PRAY!

*As you close this chapter with prayer, talk to God along the following lines:*

- *Thank him for his word, which really is one unified story of his redemptive work in the world through his Son.*
- *Praise him for revealing his salvation to sinful human beings so that they can accept him and be part of his people.*
- *Ask him to help you in further understanding the Bible and the central work of Jesus Christ.*

PART 1

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# THE OLD TESTAMENT



## Chapter 2

# **GOD'S CREATION AND A CRISIS** PART 1

It's time now for us to begin moving through the scenes of God's big story—the story of redemption that is told throughout the pages of Scripture. While Scripture itself never states how many of these scenes there are and doesn't use them to organize itself, we are going to look at eight divisions in the story of the Bible.

In this chapter and the next one, we will dig into the first of these scenes: “God's Creation and a Crisis.” As you can imagine, we will be studying the first three chapters of Genesis in the following pages as we seek to get a sense of where and how this whole story begins. If you have not studied Genesis in detail before, this will be an opportunity for you to get to know the beginning of the Bible story in a new way. If you have studied Genesis previously, hopefully this study will help you go even deeper in your understanding of this book.





### Remember!

Your suggested memory verses for this chapter come from Genesis 1:26–27—the account of God’s creation of human beings:

*Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*

*So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)*

### OUR STARTING POINT

The starting point of the book of Genesis is important for us as we study the Bible. You see, the fact that the Bible begins with the creation of the world by God gives us a very important foundational truth. The account of creation sets God up as the Creator; everything else in the big story of his work in the world flows out of this foundational truth.



### READ!

*Read Genesis 1:1–2.*

Think about a few important implications of the truth that God is the Creator:

*The Creator/creature distinction.* Perhaps the most basic acknowledgment that humans can make as they seek to relate to God is that he is the Creator and they are his creatures. In other words, creation sets up the great truth that God is the Creator and we are not. There is a

huge distinction between everything that has been created—including human beings—and the infinitely wise and powerful Creator of the universe. Before a man or woman can begin to get to know God, he or she must start with this basic admission: “I have been created by God.”

*God as King.* As we will see from the rest of the Bible story, the doctrine of creation sets God up as the rightful King of the universe. Many times in Scripture, God reminds his people of his creation of the world—and of the fact that this makes him the true and rightful King of it. As the Creator, God alone decides the purpose of this world and the calling of the human beings he has made. No one else can claim the right to rule over this world. The Creator, very naturally, holds all the rights as King and ruler over what he has chosen to create.

*Humans as dependent.* Finally, the doctrine of creation means that humans, as created beings, are ultimately dependent on their Creator for everything. They are obviously dependent on him for their very existence; they did not create themselves but were made by God for his perfect purpose. But human beings also depend on God for life—both on earth and for eternity, if God so wishes to grant that amazing gift to human beings. The doctrine of creation sets up God as the one on whom all human beings ultimately depend—for life, meaning, and salvation.

So there is a distinction between God and his creation. Creation means that God is the rightful King of all the world. And creation reminds us that humans depend on God for life now and for eternal life to come. These are extremely important starting points as we begin piecing together the entire story of the Bible.

## THE ETERNAL CREATOR GOD

Now that we have considered some of the big implications of the doctrine of creation, let's focus in on verse 1 of Genesis 1 and think about what it means for the reality and eternality of the person of God. Then

we need to ponder what his eternal existence means for us as we begin to seek to approach him in worship—that is, to seek a relationship with him through his Son, Jesus Christ.



### **READ!**

*Read Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 4 in light of the idea of the eternal existence of God, and the praise and worship that this truth demands.*

Genesis begins with these words: “In the beginning, God . . .” This simple introduction to the book—and to the entire Bible—reminds us of an incredibly significant fact: the God who created this world and us has existed forever in glory, splendor, and power.

Think about this for a moment. There has never been a time—ever—that God has not existed. There was a time when you did not yet exist. There was a time when this entire world—the whole universe—did not exist. God, though, is eternal; he has always existed in his perfect being, glory, and holiness. This concept is far beyond our capacity as humans to completely grasp.

In the beginning, before anything existed, God was there; he chose to create the universe, the reality that we know and see all around us. So what does this mean for us as we begin our study of the big story of the Bible?

*God has existed eternally as the same God.* First, it means that God has always been the same; he has not changed throughout time but has eternally existed as exactly the same God. The Bible reveals him to us as one God in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God has eternally existed in this way, and always will.

This idea that God never changes will become very important for us as we begin to study the Old Testament accounts of God’s dealings with his people. We will need to remember that the same God who spoke to Moses and Abraham is the God who invites us to know him and worship him through faith in Christ!

*God has life within himself.* Next, the truth of God's eternality means that he has life within himself. No one gives life to God; he exists completely on his own. This is a difficult concept to grasp because this is true of no other being in the universe, including Satan and all the angels. God is the only being who does not depend on *any* other factor for his existence. He has existed from eternity as who he is, having life within himself, and in perfect harmony as one God in three persons.

*God does not need us.* This truth flows out of the last one. If God has existed eternally with life within himself, and with perfect harmony within the Trinity, then it follows that God does not need us. He did not choose to create the heavens, the earth, and human beings because of some deficiency in his existence or because he was lonely! God is completely self-sufficient—"happy" and full of life within himself. It must be that God chose to create simply for his own glory—out of the overflow of his own goodness and pleasure, which he possessed before the universe began.

*We need God.* This all means, of course, that while God does not need us, we desperately need him. We are finite beings; because of sin (which we will study soon in Genesis 3), we get sick, grow old, and die. Our only hope on this earth is to find a way to know this glorious Creator and to be saved through a relationship with him. Human beings desperately need this salvation. The amazing promise that we will learn as we study the Bible is that God truly offers this salvation to the humans he has created.

## **CREATION EX NIHILO**

Now let's expand our focus to the first two verses of Genesis 1 as we ponder the concept of God's creation out of nothing. It is important to realize that God created the world in this way—not from pre-existing materials, but out of nothing at all. This points us again to the amazing power and glory of the God who made us.

**READ!**

*Read Genesis 1:1–2, as well as Hebrews 11:3.*

The important and fundamental truth that Genesis 1—and Hebrews 11—teach is that when God created the world, he made it out of *nothing*. This doctrine is often referred to as creation *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” It means that when God created the universe, he did not use any materials that were “lying around” in order to form things. He literally made physical things—tangible reality—appear out of nothing. God created the world completely out of “thin air”—although there was not even air before the world existed!

Genesis 1:2 says that the earth was “without form and void.” This is probably just a way of saying that there was simply nothing there except for God. Nothing had shape; there was no reality or substance in the universe apart from God.

Like the eternal existence of God, this is a concept that is simply too difficult for us to even imagine. No matter how hard we try, our human minds cannot fully grasp the idea of complete nothingness. That’s why the author of Hebrews tells us that it is a matter of “faith” to believe that God indeed created the world in this way (Heb. 11:3).

These truths lead to two important questions:

*How did God create the world?* He did not create it with his “hands” or with any pre-existing materials. The Genesis creation account, as well as Hebrews, tells us this important truth: God created the universe by the power of his *word* (Gen. 1:3; Heb. 11:3). God *spoke* the world into existence. This simple but profound truth has incredible implications for the rest of the story of the Bible, especially as it relates to the power and effectiveness of God’s word. We serve a God who commanded reality to become real. His word is incredibly powerful; it has *creative* power.

*Why is ex nihilo important?* This doctrine is crucial because it reminds us that nothing preceded God in existence—no physical

beings or tangible objects. *Ex nihilo* means that everything that exists ultimately has its origin and source in God himself. He is the true beginning of all things—visible and invisible. The entire universe, including human beings, came from the powerful and creative word of the eternally existent and all-powerful God. If we do not start at this point, we will not have a good chance of understanding much of the Bible story at all!

In the next section of this chapter, we will move into the actual account of creation, as we see the way God spoke the world into existence by his great power.

## GOD CREATES BY SPEAKING

So far, we've considered Genesis 1:1 and 2. In Genesis 1:3–25, which you will read in a moment, you will see creation taking shape, as God “speaks” all of it into existence. As the “days” of creation continue, you will see God giving more and more shape to his world—filling it with living things, and bringing organization to the way in which it all will work together. Hopefully you will see the beauty and wisdom of this great Creator, which is taught in this passage of Scripture and still reflected in our world today.



### READ!

*Read Genesis 1:1–25—the account of the first five days of creation.*

As you have seen, Genesis 1 leaves no doubt as to who is the sovereign author of creation. It is God, who created all things according to his wise plan and powerful word. Now we will simply look at some important points that this passage teaches us, then touch briefly on the issue of the interpretation of the days of creation.

- God's creation by his word. As I have mentioned before, it is essential that we notice the manner in which God created every part of his world. He did it with his *word*. At every step along the

way, the repeated refrain is “And God said . . .” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24). God did not even need to get his hands dirty as he created the world. He is so powerful that he can speak reality—the physical universe—into existence. This is truly a great God, the rightful King of all.

- God’s wisdom and order. Notice, too, the amazing order that God displayed as he created the world. He carefully, with great wisdom, separated the land from the waters in the perfect places and ratios (Gen. 1:9) and ordained the “lights” in the “expanse of the heavens” (Gen. 1:14) to have their proper places and times. God, we see, engages in careful planning and wise ordering of every detail of his creation.
- God’s authority and power. As the account of God’s creation goes on, we see that he was completely in control of every aspect. He spoke and things happened. Lights appeared in the heavens; waters swarmed with living creatures; animals began to fill the earth. God is the one with all authority and power in every inch of creation. He is sovereign, powerful, and completely in control.

One common point of debate about this first chapter of the Bible is the precise meaning of the days of creation. Some people insist that these days were literal twenty-four-hour periods. Others hold that we have freedom to accept that the days may have been time periods or ages. The Hebrew word that is translated as “day” here does have a range of meanings; it can refer to literal twenty-four-hour days or periods of time (such as the “day” of Noah, the time period in which Noah lived). Many people hold to the “day-age” theory because it seems to fit more closely with scientific studies that describe an older earth.

Whatever Christians believe concerning the meaning of these days, clearly the Genesis account describes the real physical creation of the world by God out of nothing. There is certainly no room for any evolutionary understanding of creation in this account! God created the world from nothing, and he did it by the power of his word.

## THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

As you read Genesis 1:1–25, you may have noticed that one little phrase accompanies every step in God's creation of the world. Let's now focus in on that phrase. As we do, we will work hard to see the implications of the great truth that is revealed through this phrase and apply it to life in this world today.



### READ!

*Read Genesis 1:1–25 again.*

The phrase I'm talking about first shows up in Genesis 1:10 and is repeated again and again as God continues his creation of the world (vv. 12, 18, 21, 25). Did you see it? Here it is: "And God saw that it was good." As God completed each aspect of creation, he looked at it and declared it "good." We should take this repetition seriously and consider deeply its implications for the way we think about this world. Here are just a few of these implications:

*God created this world with beauty and care.* We live in a world that was not "thrown together" haphazardly by a God who was trying to make something in a hurry. The fact that God stopped, admired his creation, and called it good tells us that he made it with great care, great attention to detail, and great beauty. God was very intentional about his creation; he took great care to make it exactly as he intended.

*God was pleased with his creation.* From this repeated phrase, we see that God was very pleased with his creation in its perfect and good beginning (before sin). He had created it, as we have discussed before, not from any need that he had for companionship or entertainment; yet he did delight in the world that he had made.

*The world reflects the character of God in some way.* Finally, we should see that since God called the world good, creation itself reflects his



character, beauty, and order, at least in some way. We will study the uniqueness and distinctiveness of human beings from all the rest of creation; no other animal, plant, or living creature is described as being made in the “image of God.” Still, the very fact that creation is described as good tells us that God left his mark on it. Everything that is good ultimately has its foundation in God himself; he is the source of all true goodness. So it makes sense that this world itself—especially in its prefall state—contained echoes of God’s goodness and love in its various parts.

Of course, as we will study soon, Adam and Eve fell, and brought sin into this good world that God had created. This creation no longer is good in the perfect way that it once was, after God first made it. Still, even this fallen world can show us glimpses of the beauty, wisdom, and love of its Creator.

### **GOD CREATES HUMAN BEINGS**

We have explored the concept of the “goodness” of God’s creation and considered the implications of this goodness as we thought about how God’s character is reflected in his good world. Now we will move on to the sixth day of creation, which records God’s creation of human beings. Something changes here in the narrative, which signals something very different about the living creatures that God creates in this account. We will examine the uniqueness of human beings—their distinctiveness from the rest of God’s physical creation.



#### **READ!**

*Read Genesis 1:26–27.*

Over five days, God put together a magnificent earth—glorious heavens above and land and waters below, filled with all kinds of plants and living creatures (“beasts” of the earth, according to Gen. 1:25). Then a change happened in the creation process. Things seemed to slow down. There are a few indications that something different was happening here:

- God spoke to himself; the holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) conversed and decided to make a creature that would be far different than the others on the earth. God began: “Let us . . .” (Gen. 1:26).
- God set human beings apart from the rest of creation by giving them “dominion” over everything else (Gen. 1:26). We will discuss this concept more soon.
- The Genesis account even gives us a kind of “poem” (Gen. 1:27), which records how God created man in his own “image”—another concept that we will discuss in more detail soon.

So at this point in the Genesis narrative, we have key signs that the creation of man is different—human beings are set apart in significant ways from the rest of God’s creation. What must we make of this? We must see, to begin with, that:

- Human beings are *special*. I do not mean special in a “feel-good” way—the way parents tell their toddlers that they are special. I mean that humans—in a way that differs from every other part of God’s creation—are special and dear to him. God actively and personally engaged in the creation of human beings in a unique way.
- Human beings are *unique*. No matter what scientists tell us today about evolution, the intelligence of apes and dolphins, or the animal instincts of human beings, the witness of Scripture (and of our experience, of course), is that people are unique in all of creation. No other animals were given the same special attention by God during creation as human beings. They are distinct from the animal world—set apart by the Creator God as uniquely intelligent and designed beings.
- Human beings are the *focal point* of God’s creation. It is significant that human beings were the final step in God’s creation—the crowning act of his creative work in the world. God made them last—on the sixth day—and gave them dominion over everything

else that he had already created. The Genesis account makes it clear that while humans are certainly creatures, God has a special—eternal—purpose for them that he does not have for any other living creature that he made.

We will talk more in the next pages about the image of God in human beings, as well as the dominion and commands that God gave to them as he created them and set them on earth.

### **THE *IMAGO DEI***

During our study of Genesis 1:26–27, we could not help but begin to engage with the concept of God’s “image” in human beings. While our discussion was focused on the uniqueness of human beings, their distinctiveness from the rest of creation, the idea of the image of God loomed over the passage.

It is this amazing reality—human beings as creatures made in the “image of God”—that we will examine carefully now. Our goal will be to understand this concept biblically as well as we can and begin to consider the amazing implications of it for the way we understand human beings and their intentional design by the infinitely wise Creator.



### **READ!**

*Read Genesis 1:26–27 again, and then read Psalm 8 as well.*

In Genesis 1, the first statement that we see about the image of God in human beings comes in verse 26. God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Then, in the summary “poem” in verse 27, the author of Genesis makes it clear that human beings—as male and female—are created in God’s image.

It is important to note, as we begin this discussion about the image of God (the *imago Dei*), that there is much debate and discussion about the precise meaning of this phrase and concept. Here are just a few of the different takes on the meaning of the image of God in human beings:

- Some have equated the image of God with *rationality*—the fact that human beings are capable of higher thinking, and in this way are set apart from every other living creature on earth.
- Some, on the basis of Genesis 1:27, have equated the image of God with *gender*. They would make the case that the creation of human beings as male and female is a way that God has reflected the distinct roles and relationships within the Trinity in human relationships.
- Some claim that the image of God has to do with our *ability to create*—that our creative impulses reflect the God who made this world from nothing, and who values beauty, artistry, and order.

Most likely, the concept of the image of God in human beings is some combination of all these amazing truths.

What does the text of Genesis tell us that would help us understand what it means that human beings are made in the image of God? First, it tells us that God decided to make people in his “likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This does not mean that we literally resemble God physically. But it does mean that we reflect him in some ways (not perfectly, of course). Second, the text of Genesis tells us that human beings as “male and female” are created in the image of God. While this certainly means that both men and women carry the *imago Dei*, it probably also implies that something about our gender—and our relationships with one another—reflects the relationships and distinctions of the Trinity.

Probably the best way to summarize the concept of the image of God is to say simply that human beings “reflect” the character and reality of God in significant ways. We are not exactly like him, of course, but our personalities, capacities, and relationships point to him. Think about just a few ways that this is certainly true:

- Human beings have the capacity to *love* deeply, in a way that no other creature on earth can do.
- Human beings have the capacity for *spiritual* thought and devotion; monkeys, for example, do not worship!

- Human beings have great capacity for *reasoning* and *abstract thought*; in this way, we certainly reflect the image of the mind of God, at least in small ways.
- Human beings love *beauty* and *creativity*; think of all the paintings and works of art that humans have created over the centuries, imitating God (in a small way) in his creative work.

In many ways, human beings truly reflect the beauty and wisdom of their Creator. He has placed his image in these creatures he has made. This gives us a hint that he has something eternally wonderful planned for people. We will see this as the big story of the Bible continues.

### HUMANS' ROLE IN CREATION

The final verses of Genesis 1 tell us how God “wrapped up” day six of creation. He gave a charge to human beings, giving them “dominion” in the world he had made. Our goal is to understand this charge clearly and to explore the concept of dominion that is put forward here.



#### READ!

*Read Genesis 1:28–31—the passage that contains God’s charge to the human beings he created regarding their dominion over his world and their role in it.*

We learned earlier that human beings were set apart from the rest of creation—made in God’s image and unique from all other living creatures. After he made them, God gave a charge to these special and unique creatures he had created. Let’s study the nature of this charge and its implications for the way we view human beings and God’s world today. What do we see from Genesis 1:28–31?

*God charged human beings to increase the human race.* First, God gave Adam and Eve the instruction to “multiply” and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). God’s goal in the creation of human beings was obviously

for them to create a great race of people for his own glory and pleasure. This creation mandate from God is a good thing. From the beginning, God wanted human beings to create more human beings in order to fill the earth with people made in his image.

*God charged human beings to have dominion over the earth.* The second part of God's charge can be a bit more difficult to understand. God called human beings to "subdue" the earth and have "dominion" over all the other living creatures (Gen. 1:28). This is a theme that King David picks up on later in Scripture—in the psalm that you read earlier. David cries out, "You have given him [man] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:6). This means:

- Human beings have a special role in ruling and reigning over this world that God has made. It is not wrong for people to rule the earth; this is a task that God has given especially to human beings, who are made in his image.
- Human beings should see themselves as "stewards"—servants of the King—in relation to the world this King has created. They are tasked with ruling it well and caring for it.
- God really does value human beings far above the rest of the physical creation. Human beings are more important to God than animals or than any other part of this earth. For that reason, he has placed them above it all.

As I noted just above, human beings are called to rule this world in loving and careful ways. Far too often, humans have sinfully abused this world; they have ruled it selfishly and wastefully. Yet the rule and dominion of human beings over the earth is God's idea. That is how he designed the world to function, and this design is a good thing.

The call for Christians, then, as they consider this charge from God to human beings, is to rule and have dominion over this earth in

ways that honor the Creator. God has given this world to them, and they are to use it well, respect it, and remember that one King—one Creator—stands over them.

### **GOD'S REST**

One final “day” of creation is mentioned in the Genesis account: the seventh day. As we think about what happened on this final day, we will consider the concept of God’s “rest” from his work of creation, and the implications of this rest for us today as followers of this amazing God.



### **READ!**

*Read Genesis 2:1–3—the account of the seventh day of creation, when God rested from his work of making the world.*

God did all of his work of creation during the first six days of the creation “week,” then set aside the seventh day to rest. The brief passage that you read tells us this day ended with God proclaiming a blessing on the seventh day and making it “holy”—set apart for him.

It is important to understand what exactly was going on during this day of rest that God took at the end of his creative work in the world. What does it mean that God rested? How does the principle of rest operate in the remainder of the Bible story?

*The meaning.* The fact that God used the seventh day for rest does *not* mean that he was tired and needed to take a break from his creation work. He was not worn out by creating the world; remember, he had simply “spoken” all things into existence.

When Genesis says that God rested, it simply means that he intentionally *stopped* his work of creation. In other words, God finished his creative work. God is still working in many ways, but after the sixth day ended, God really ceased to create. So he rested from his work of creation when this world was complete (and “very good” in his eyes; Gen. 1:31).

*The Sabbath.* In the time of the Old Testament, when God's people, the Israelites, lived under the law of Moses, the day of rest became an important principle that guided their lives and worship. Since God rested on the seventh day of his creation, he commanded his people to take a day of rest from their work each week—a “holy” day that would be devoted not only to rest but also to the worship of their God (Ex. 20:11). You have probably read about the “Sabbath” day—and possibly even about the debates that Jesus had with the Pharisees about this day! The Sabbath principle came from God and was given to his people to guide the rhythms of their lives and give them space to rest and worship him.

*“Rest” in the Bible.* There is something very interesting in the creation story that we must not miss. Do you remember the phrase that wrapped up each of the previous days of creation? It was this: “And there was evening and there was morning, the \_\_\_\_ day” (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Does that phrase appear after the description of the seventh day? No, it does not! Why is this?

The absence of this phrase must mean that we are still *living in the seventh day of creation*. God is still resting from his creation work; he is dwelling in the seventh day even now.

The book of Hebrews picks up on this theme by talking about the permanent “Sabbath rest” of God (Heb. 4:1), which we enter only by resting, by faith, in his Son. The author of Hebrews uses this picture to talk about God's eternal peace and salvation, which he gives to his redeemed people out of the overflow of his own peace and rest. To put faith in God is to enter, spiritually, into his eternal “rest.”

So as we consider the passage from Genesis, we ought to understand that the God we serve is resting, even now, from his work of creating the world. He is dwelling in infinite holiness and perfect rest. By God's grace, we can enter this state of rest through faith in Jesus Christ.

*The principle of rest for us.* We who follow Jesus today are not under the law of Moses. This Old Testament law shows us God's holiness and



should expose our sin and drive us to Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord. But we are not called to follow all of the Sabbath laws and customs as the Jewish believers were in the days of Moses.

Still, there is a good practical principle for us that comes from this Genesis account. As God gave his law to his people in the Old Testament, he commanded them to take a Sabbath day of rest in order to set aside time to worship him (Ex. 20:8–11). We, too, should make sure that we are setting aside intentional time—resting from our work—to engage in the holy worship of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Many Christians today see this Sabbath principle fulfilled in the “Lord’s Day”—usually Sunday—a day when they gather with other believers in Jesus to rest from work and to worship God through singing, prayer, the preaching of the Bible, and the celebration of the sacraments.

### REVIEW

In this chapter, we’ve started with the fundamental truths of the Bible’s story: God is the almighty Creator of all things, including human beings, whom he made in his image and for his glory. As Creator and King, God defines what is right and good for all his creation. The story of the Bible begins there—and so must we as we seek to get a sense of the big picture of Scripture.



### PRAY!

*As you close this chapter in prayer, ask God to remind you of his power and authority, which are demonstrated by his creation. Pray that you would remember that, as Creator, he is also the great King of all the earth. He is to be worshiped, followed, and obeyed in everything.*