

The Story of Scripture

The Bible is made up of many different books, letters, poems, and narratives but is one whole, comprehensive story. Understanding the overarching story of Scripture - the meta narrative of the Bible is extremely important. When we understand the whole story of God we start to realize that this is a living story - it's still unfolding and we get drawn into the story and find that we have an important part to play. Think about this meta-narrative being like a six-act play.

Act 1 - Creation (God Establishes His Kingdom)

The curtain opens on the Biblical drama—its first act is God’s creation of the universe. As a supreme ruler, God calls all things into being by His sovereign decree. Each creature plays a part in this grand symphony of creation, and every part is declared “good.” God’s creative work climaxes in His creation of human beings to be like himself and to rule the world as His stewards. These first human beings, Adam and Eve, enjoy warm and close fellowship with God in the garden as they carry out their task of looking after the world, delighting in and developing its rich potentials, and thanking God. By the end of the first act, the curtain closes on a ‘very good’ world.

Act 2 - Fall (Rebellion in the Kingdom)

Bright anticipation characterizes the opening of act two. God gives Adam and Eve everything they need; their lives are rich and full as they delight in God and the gifts He has given. God places one restriction on them: they are not to eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden or everything will be ruined. By submitting to God’s word, Adam and Eve learn the joy of living as trustful and dependent creatures. But Satan offers another word, a lie, by which Adam and Eve can live. In a tragic twist, they listen to the lie of Satan and contravene God’s command.

This treasonous act of rebellion sends shock-waves throughout the whole creation. Adam’s and Eve’s rebellion corrupts the warm friendship they had enjoyed with God as they walked together in the garden, delighting in God’s presence and gifts. They find themselves estranged from God and hide from His presence. Their revolt also damages relations between human beings. Adam’s and Eve’s relationship to each other becomes one of selfish mastery. The effects are soon seen as their son Cain murders his brother, Abel, and as violence and evil spreads among the earth’s growing population. Their apostasy further ravages the harmonious relationship enjoyed previously between humanity and the non-human creation. Every relationship and every part of human life is now defiled by their betrayal. Already, even death has entered the world. As the curtain closes on the second act, Adam and Eve are in the middle of a mess. The whole world is now befouled by their rebellion.

Act 3 - Israel (A People for the King)

As the curtain rises in act three, one burning question remains: how will God respond to a world that has chosen to go its own way and that continues to ignore his good plans? To start, God brings judgement; He expels Adam and Eve from the garden. But God also brings hope when He promises to crush all the evil forces that Adam and Eve have unleashed in their foolish mutiny (Gen. 3:15). The next few millennia, recorded for us in a few brief chapters (Gen. 3-11), are the story of two interwoven developments: the increasing darkness of sin and God’s faithfulness to His promise to banish that darkness.

In spite of human rebellion, God does not abandon His plans for His world. About two thousand years before Jesus, God sets into motion a plan that will lead to the recovery of the world. This promised plan has two parts: First, out of this mass of rebellious humanity, God will choose one

man (Josh. 24:2). God will make this man into a great nation and give that nation a land and bless them. Second, God will extend that blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18). Over the course of Israel's long history, there are times when they are faithful to God and offer his light to the nations of the world. But more often than not, Israel runs from God and pursues their own way, just like Adam and Eve. Far from being a showcase to the nations, God's people push his patience to the point at which He expels them from the land. God seeks to halt their deadly course by raising up prophets to call them back to repentance. Through these prophets, God promises that if Israel will return to him He will be gracious and continue to work with them. He also warns that if Israel continues to rebel He will bring judgement and finally send them into exile. As Israel's situation becomes more incurable, the prophets promise that God has not given up. In fact, He promises He will send a future king who will usher in a reign of peace and justice. As the curtain closes on the third act, Israel has failed to carry out the task God gave them, but hope remains because of the faithful promises of God.

Act 4 - Jesus (*The Coming of the Kingdom*)

Into this setting of feverish anticipation for God's kingdom steps a young Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth. He announces the kingdom has come—in him! God is now acting in love and power to restore the creation and humanity to live again under the kind rule of God, the way God designed it all in the beginning. Jesus, however, is not the kind of king Israel is expecting. He is not the freedom fighter who will throw off the Roman yoke and make Israel great again. In fact, he seems more like a wandering teacher or prophet. Jesus goes about gathering a small community of insignificant followers around him and calls them the new vanguard of God's coming new world. God's power to restore is evident as Jesus heals people and frees them from evil spirits. His invitation extends beyond the 'washed' and acceptable: he welcomes religious and social outcasts into his new community. As he challenges the customs and expectations of the day, he arouses growing opposition among the leaders. Jesus teaches his followers to live lives steeped in love, forgiveness, and righteousness. The kingdom is coming, not by destroying your enemies but by loving them, not by using force but by suffering, not by revenging but by forgiving, not by retreating from the 'unwashed' but by compassionately involving yourselves in their lives.

But the majority of Jesus' fellow Jews do not recognize him. Opposition to his work mounts until they arrest him, put him on a mock trial, and take him to the Roman governor for execution. Jesus is handed over to suffer the most appalling of all deaths— Roman crucifixion. Surely no king would die such a disgraceful death! Yet his followers declare weeks later that it is at that very moment—in the shame and pain of the cross— that God accomplishes his plan to recover his lost and broken world. Here Jesus takes the sin and brokenness of the world on himself so that the world might be healed. He dies, nailed to a cross, to take the punishment that a guilty humanity rightly deserves. It is now possible for the world, and all people in it, to be made right with God.

How can his followers make such a preposterous claim? Because of the resurrection! They believe Jesus walked out of the grave and is alive from the dead. What astonishing news! His resurrection is the sign of his victory over evil; it is the first evidence of a new world dawning. But before that new world comes fully Jesus gathers his followers and gives them a task: 'You are to continue doing what you saw me doing' (John 20:21). 'You are to make known God's coming rule in your lives, your deeds and your words. God's new world will come in time. But until then, announce its coming and show by the way you live that it is a reality. I limited my work,' Jesus says, 'to Israel. Now you are to spread this good news of God's coming world through the whole world.' The fourth act ends with Jesus taking his rightful throne, in heaven at the right hand of God.

Act 5 - Church (*Spreading the News of the Kingdom*)

The book of Acts begins with the sudden and explosive coming of the Holy Spirit, whose coming the prophets and Jesus, himself, had promised (Acts 2). He comes, intent on bringing the new life of God's kingdom to all who turn from sin, believe renewal has come in Jesus, and are baptized into the emerging kingdom community. This new community is established and commits itself to doing those things that God promises to use to renew in them the life of the resurrection: the Word of God, prayer, fellowship with one another, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). As they do this, the life of God's kingdom more and more shows itself in Jerusalem, and the church begins to grow. The church spreads from Jerusalem to Judea and into Samaria. Then a new hub is established in Antioch (Acts 11:19-28). The church at Antioch catches a vision for taking this good news to places where it has not been heard. And so they commission two men, Paul and Barnabas, for this task (Acts 13:1-3).

Paul plays a huge role in the spread of the good news throughout the Roman Empire. He was once a militant enemy of the church, but a dramatic encounter with Jesus turns him into a leading missionary to the non-Jewish world. He dedicates his life to traveling throughout the Roman Empire, starting new churches and writing letters to these young Jesus communities to encourage them and instruct them about how to live as followers of the risen Jesus. These letters, along with others, eventually are collected into the New Testament. Each of these letters continues today, in the twenty-first century, to give valuable instruction on what to believe about the good news and how to live faithfully under God's rule in our daily lives. The book of Acts ends with Paul being transported to Rome and living there under house arrest. Not a very satisfying ending to a dramatic story of the spread of the gospel! But Acts ends without finality for a reason. The story is not finished. It must continue to unfold until Jesus returns again.

This is our place in the story! The story of God's people, growing in numbers and gathering from every nation into one community, has continued for 2,000 years, and it continues today. Any who hear the call of Jesus to follow him must center their lives in him and commit themselves to living the life of God's kingdom. Faith in Jesus brings the gift of the Spirit, a foretaste of the full kingdom meal that is yet to come. To use a different metaphor, the church is now a preview of the coming kingdom. The church picks up Israel's task of being a showcase of what God intends for human life (Ex. 19:3-6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-12). The church is to continue the kingdom mission that Jesus began among the Jews, a kingdom established now among all the people of the earth. The mission of God's people is to make known the good news of the kingdom. And since the rule of Jesus covers the whole earth, the mission of God's people is as broad as creation. In effect, God's people are to live lives that say, 'This is how the whole world will be some day when Jesus returns!'

Act 6 - New Creation (*The Return of the King*)

Jesus promised that one day he would return and complete the work he had begun. And so his people live in the confident expectation that every challenge to his loving rule will be crushed and that the His kingdom will come fully. When he returns, the dead will be raised and all people will appear before him in judgement. God's opponents will be overthrown, earth and heaven will be renewed, and God's rule will be complete.

The last book in the Bible is Revelation. In that book John is ushered into God's throne room to see how things really are. He is shown that, whatever evidence exists to the contrary, Jesus, whom the church follows, is in control of world events. He is moving history toward its appointed end. At that end, the old world dominated by evil, pain, suffering, and death will be overthrown. God will again dwell among humanity as He did in the beginning. He will wipe away tears. There

will be no more death, mourning, pain, suffering, or evil. With joy, those of us who have followed this story anticipate hearing God's own voice: 'I am making everything new!' (Rev. 21:5) The marvelous imagery of the last chapters of Revelation directs the reader's gaze to the end of history and to the restoration of the whole of God's creation. He invites all the thirsty to come even now and to drink the waters of life but warns all those who remain outside the kingdom. The Bible ends with a promise repeated three times—'I am coming soon' (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). And we echo the response of the author of Revelation: 'Yes! Come Lord Jesus.' ***

*** Adapted from *The Story-line of the Bible* by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen