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Chapter 1

Who is Jesus?

Amanda grew up in a Christian home and attended church throughout her childhood. She listened attentively in Sunday School as the teacher taught stories from the Bible, but as an adult she has struggled to find any relevance in the Bible. Most of the stories from her elementary understanding of scripture seem strange to her as an adult. A boy fighting a giant with just a few rocks? A boat full of animals saved from a flood? A sea separated into dry land? Are these stories just children's fables? What do they have to do with God? Even more directly, Susan wants to know what they have to do with her.

We love a good story, especially a narrative of good fighting evil or love being pursued at all costs. Long lasting are those epic tales of beauty being concealed until just the right moment or the unlikely lovers overcoming odds and obstacles to find each other. From childhood, we want to hear these stories told over and over. Even when we know the outcome, we want to watch and re-watch them depicted on the screen or the stage. Whether in a song or in

a movie, it is difficult in our day to come up with a new twist on the classic love story. Perhaps we find such pleasure in these tales because our lives are playing out in one.

Hold that thought...

To tell us what He is like, God did not simply drop a book down from heaven. He could have. Some religions believe their god revealed truth about himself in a vision or visions to one person who wrote it down in a sacred book. Mormons and Muslims believe this, for example. In other religions, the sacred text consists mainly of a catalog of approved behaviors, rituals, or customs. Sects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism hold to their sacred writings. But only Christians believe God deliberately revealed Himself over time in a story. The story certainly includes rituals, ceremonies, and laws, but like a great symphony each of those are only parts of the whole. The parts cannot be rightly understood and appreciated fully without hearing the entire symphony, just as the symphony is not as beautiful when any of the parts are missing.

Because God chose to carefully reveal Himself to us over a long period of time through a sweeping and dramatic story, we learn more than mere facts about Him; we see His character in action as He binds Himself over generations in covenant love to a people and teaches them about Himself.

This story through which God reveals Himself in the Bible is unapologetically about Him and His own glory. The drama unfolds as a love story, with the surprising and good news that God gets glory through His gracious and steadfast pursuit of a most unlikely object of His affection, the often unlovely and consistently rebellious people He created. As this love story progresses over generations, the main character turns out to be the Son of God Himself, given sacrificially for His beloved bride. Scripture tells us He is the clearest picture we can have of what the invisible Father God is like (Col. 1:15; John 10:30; Heb. 1:3; John 1:18; John 14:7-11).

The Point of the Story

In order to fully appreciate who the Son of God is, we must understand His role in the storyline of Scripture. As the hero of the Bible, He came to rescue His beloved bride who was helplessly in distress. While the Scriptures are made up of hundreds of stories that are often told on their own, they are merely parts of this grander tale. They are scenes of a play, not telling their own story but rather contributing to the developing plot of the entire drama. When the singular story told in Scripture is that of a rebellious people being pursued and rescued by a holy God through a promised Savior, the main character takes His rightful place – centerstage.

Act I in the Bible is the Old Testament, and the curtain opens with the splendid and glorious creation of the world. The drama moves quickly as we meet both the people God made and the wicked yet clever adversary of God. This serpent cunningly convinces the people to join Him in rebellion against their Maker. Man's decision to sin in the Garden of Eden separated them from God. Instantly, man knew distance from God. But that was not all it did. It placed them directly under God's wrath with no ability to appease Him. The people's sin against God had severe consequences: where there once was abundant life, God guaranteed certain death; pain entered their previously idyllic life; where there had been intimacy with God, they now faced His wrath. Yet, remarkably God patiently called His people to repentance that day and for the generations that followed. God even promised that one would eventually come to rescue His people from this dire state they were in. A savior would come who would undo the effects of sin and restore God's people to a right relationship with their Creator.

After a 400-year intermission in which there is no new revelation from God, the curtain opens again on Act II. The New Testament reveals that the long-promised, long-anticipated rescuer has come in the flesh, and, although it was foreshadowed, surprisingly the rescuer turns out to be God Himself. Through difficulty and trial

and although He is fiercely opposed by His adversary, in the end the hero rescues His bride. The Gospels and the books that follow contain the life and death of this rescuer, Jesus, and instructions for the church (the beloved bride of Jesus) as she awaits the second coming of her groom, when He will come back to get her and they will live happily ever after together forever.

The life and death of Jesus changed everything about the relationship between the Creator and His creation. Jesus restored fellowship between sinful man and a holy God. His entrance into the world is not only the dividing line of the holy Scriptures, but also of world history. Historians date events as B.C. (Before Christ) or A.D. (*Anno Domini*, a Latin phrase meaning ‘in the year of our Lord,’ or after Christ was born). Scripture affirms that Jesus is not only the focal point of the whole Bible, but all of human history. From Genesis to Revelation, Jesus is the point of it all (John 5:39, Luke 24:27, Luke 24:44-47). The Bible is not merely a clever love story. It is a history book, full of truth and records of actual events.

Even if it is familiar to you, it is worth our time to consider an overview of this story and the main character again.

Act I: The Fall

The Old Testament begins at the very good beginning with God as creator of all things – the day and night; the sun, moon, and stars; and the animals on land, sea, and air. The first week spectacularly climaxed with the creation of the first people being made ‘in the image of God’ (Gen. 1:27). God generously and graciously placed Adam and Eve in a perfect garden where He communed directly with them and they had unfiltered access to Him. He gave them to each other for their companionship, enjoyment, and so they could multiply and fill the earth with offspring. He provided them an abundance of good food to eat and easy access to it all. He gave them good work to do and a beautiful and luxurious office space to do it in. He loved His creation and especially His people,

and out of this lavish love He gave them the unique privilege and unparalleled responsibility of tending to His creation. They alone had the opportunity to image their Maker in the way they cared for God's creation on His behalf.

But instead of living in obedience to this good God and His obviously good authority, Adam and Eve turned against Him. Instead of obediently ruling over creation, Adam and Eve listened to the lies of the serpent, letting him rule over them. In eating the forbidden fruit, they refused God's good authority, rejected His kindness and generosity to them, and rebelled against their very Creator. In doing so, they formed a massive chasm between themselves and their God.

JESUS, FIRST PROMISED IN THE GARDEN

Our world was irrevocably altered after this fall of mankind into sin. The very good world of Eden found in Genesis 1-2 suddenly became the sin-cursed, thorn-infected world of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve's rebellion against God was far more than a mere mistake; it introduced something evil into the perfect world God had created. The serpent had promised the eyes of Adam and Eve would be opened if they rebelled against God, but what they saw was shame. After their transgression, the previously innocent world was filled with guilt as the first couple became aware of their nakedness and covered themselves with fig leaves. Their physical nakedness pointed toward their spiritual helplessness as they stood in obvious need of covering. The consequences of this first sin were dire. God declared that the fruitfulness He had so generously given to Adam and Eve would now come only with great difficulty. For Eve, being fruitful and multiplying would from then on be marked by great pain. For Adam, His previously fruitful bounty would now come through difficult toil, thorns, and thistles (Gen. 3:16-19). As a result of sin, Adam and Eve knew difficulty in their lives and distance from their God. If man were ever to know a garden-like

state and unity with God again, God Himself would have to bring it about. Remarkably, that is what God promised the man and the woman at the beginning of the story, right after the fall, as God moved in a surprisingly gracious way.

Instead of striking them dead immediately for their rebellion, He promised an offspring for the woman who would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15). They deserved death; He promised new life. Judgement was coming, but God would provide a path for salvation through it. Despite their act of cosmic treason, God made 'for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them' (Gen. 3:21). God revealed something about Himself and provided the first hints about what the price of sin would require. In this account, we see a God who is unmistakably gracious and kind toward His people as He promised one would come to atone for sin and cover His people's spiritual nakedness. To do this, a death would have to take place. In Genesis 3, we see it in the animal whose skin was used to cover Adam and Eve, and we see it as God mysteriously promised the serpent, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15). Dramatically, this warning foreshadowed a great battle between the offspring of the woman and the serpent. Yet, behind the ominous warning is the God who promised the serpent-crushing offspring, a Savior who would cover His people not simply with garments of animal skin but robes of righteousness, purchased with blood.

Generations of God's people watched for this promised one who would rescue His people. And while they waited, God sent prophets to foretell the circumstances of His birth, His life, and even His shameful death. These prophets, whose stories and biographies comprise much of the Old Testament, continuously call God's people to repent of their sins while reminding them to trust that God will one day provide a rescuer.