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INTRODUCTION

Jesus got it down to two. Love God and love your neighbor—“all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:40).

Micah got it down to three. “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Even Moses got it down to five. Fear, walk, love, serve, obey . . . that’s it (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

So getting it down to seven should not be too hard.

That’s what I thought, anyway. But then I wondered, as you might also, is it really right to condense the Scriptures in this way? After all, God gave us a pretty big library of books in the Bible, most of them in the Old Testament part. Paul insists that “all Scripture [meaning the Old Testament in his day] is God-breathed and useful” (2 Timothy 3:16). Ought we to be shortening it all into bite-size sentences and small chapters of explanation? Is a book about the Bible like this one *biblically* appropriate?

In addition to those three extreme examples above, there are quite a number of other places in the Bible itself where the whole message is trimmed down to a very condensed version, in order to make some of the crucial points crystal clear. Typically this is done by *telling the story*, or whatever part of it had happened by that time. For example:

- Moses summarizes the story so far in Deuteronomy 1–3 to urge greater obedience to God in the future.
- Israelite farmers are to recite the story as a way of affirming God’s blessing and their own commitment to obey him (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).
- Joshua does it again with the next generation to urge them to go on choosing to serve their covenant God (Joshua 24).
- Two lengthy psalms, Psalms 105–6, tell the story again, showing how unfaithful Israel had been over the centuries and how much they owed, then and still, to the patience and grace of God.
- Nehemiah tells the whole story from creation to his own day as the basis for pleading with God for forgiveness and restoration of the people (Nehemiah 9:1-37).
- Jesus tells the story in the form of a parable about a vineyard and wicked tenants in a way that is very recognizable by those who oppose him (Matthew 21:33-46).
- Stephen tells the story, from Abraham to the crucifixion of Jesus, in a way that shows God’s impatience with the constant rebellion of his people and enrages Stephen’s listeners so much that they execute him for blasphemy (Acts 7:1-60).
- Paul tells the story (in almost seven sentences) in a rapid sequence that probably reflects his regular preaching and teaching: Abraham, exodus, land, judges, kings, David . . . and then straight to Jesus, Messiah and King (Acts 13:16-41).

What all these examples have in common, as I said, is that they do this summarizing work in narrative form. For that is essentially what the Old Testament (and indeed the whole Bible) is—the great story of the universe. All that the Old Testament has to teach us falls within the structure of that great story.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A LIBRARY

However, just before we fill out that story a little more, in relation to our seven sentences, we should take note of the structure of the Old Testament as we have it in our English Bibles. It comes to us as a library of books, divided into several fairly clear sections or categories.

- *The Pentateuch* (a Greek word that means “five books”). These are the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Bible calls this section the Torah. This word is often translated “the Law,” but that is somewhat misleading. The word actually means “guidance” or “teaching,” and although these books do contain laws that God gave to Israel, they also contain important narratives and a few songs and poems.
- *Historical books*. The books from Joshua to Esther give us the story of Israel, from the conquest of Canaan to the time after the Jews return from exile in Babylon—a period stretching from roughly 1200 to 450 BC.
- *Poetic books*. The books from Job to Song of Songs are a mixture of worship songs, wisdom texts, and a beautiful love poem.
- *Prophets*. Finally, the whole section from Isaiah to Malachi are books compiled from the preaching of those God raised up as prophets over a period of approximately three hundred years.

That is the order of the books in most modern Bibles. However, the order of books in the original Hebrew Scriptures, known as the canon, which Jews still use today and which would have been the order at the time of Jesus, is a little different. The whole library is divided into just *three* sections: the Law or Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (or, as Jesus refers to the three sections, “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” [Luke 24:44]).

The Torah

- The Pentateuch (as above)

The Prophets

- The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings (Jews regarded these as prophetic—that is, history told from God’s point of view)
- The Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve, from Hosea to Malachi

The Writings

- Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles

You can see from the table of contents that three of my seven sentences come from the Torah, one from the Former Prophets, two from the Latter Prophets, and one from the Writings.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A DRAMA

Let’s come back to the point that the Old Testament fundamentally tells a story. To be more precise, it tells the essential first part of the great story that the whole Bible tells. To change the picture a bit, the Bible is not just story; it is like a great *drama*—an enormous play with a huge cast of actors, all playing their part in a vast narrative whose author and director is God himself. Here’s the thing: we are not mere spectators, an audience in the theater of the Bible. No, we get to be part of the story; we become actors on stage. Indeed, we are called and commissioned to join the cast of God’s drama and play our part in our own generation. We are in the Bible. Let me explain further.

Like most great dramas, the drama of the Bible is divided into several acts—that is, major sections of the story in which distinct

and significant things take place as the drama moves forward. We can picture the whole Bible as a drama with six acts.¹

- *Act 1: Creation.* The whole drama begins when the one living and eternal God chooses to create what we call the universe—heaven and earth. He creates it “good,” and he creates human beings in God’s own image, to rule and serve his good creation.
- *Act 2: Rebellion.* Humans choose to distrust God’s goodness, disbelieve God’s word, and disobey God’s instructions. As a result, sin and evil enter into every dimension of human life, personal and social, and also corrupt all cultures and bring damage and frustration to creation.
- *Act 3: Promise.* The story of the rest of the Old Testament begins with God’s promise to Abraham that not only will he become a great nation (Israel), but that through them God will bring blessing to all nations on earth. That promise and hope drives the story forward through the history of Israel in the Old Testament era, as we shall survey.
- *Act 4: Gospel.* The promise of the Old Testament comes to fulfillment when Jesus of Nazareth is born. The great central act of the drama of Scripture includes all that we read in the four Gospels: the conception, birth, life, teaching, atoning death, victorious resurrection, and ascension of Messiah Jesus.
- *Act 5: Mission.* The promise to Abraham must be fulfilled. The good news of what God has accomplished through his Son Jesus must go to all nations. This is launched at the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts, after the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the followers of Jesus.
- *Act 6: New creation.* The final act of the drama is when Christ returns to establish his kingdom. There will be the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the purging and

renewal of the whole creation—a new heaven and earth (not in the sense of the complete obliteration of our present universe, but a renewal and restoration of creation to all that God intended it to be), with God once again dwelling in the midst of his redeemed people from all nations.

Seeing the whole Bible story in this way has many benefits.

First of all, it keeps us attached to the way God has chosen to give us the Bible itself—not merely as a book full of promises, or rules, or doctrines (there are plenty of all of these in the Bible, but these are not what the Bible actually *is*), but in the form of a grand narrative with a beginning and an ending (actually a new beginning) and the whole redemptive plot in the middle.

Second, it reminds us that *this is our story*. For if we have come to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we are participants in act five of the drama of Scripture. That's where we are—somewhere between the resurrection of Christ and the return of Christ. In that place we have a role, a part to play, a mission to accomplish, with God and for God.

Third, it shows us just how important the Old Testament is and how utterly wrong, misleading, and dangerous are those who tell Christians that they can happily ditch the Old Testament. This idea, which has become popular again (partly through sheer ignorance of the Bible and partly because of some high-profile preachers saying so), is not at all new. Less than a hundred years after Christ's resurrection, a man named Marcion tried to persuade the church that the God of the Old Testament was a completely different god from the God and Father of Jesus (that's where you heard it before, folks), and that the church should jettison the Old Testament and some parts of the New as well because they were too Jewish. The church rejected his teaching as wrong and heretical, and held on to the

Old Testament Scriptures as a vital part of God's full revelation and therefore of the Christian canon of the Bible.

And as we survey the six acts of the drama of Scripture, we can see how important it is that they did so. Without the first three acts, Jesus becomes just another human savior of some kind. The story would lose its essential beginning (creation), its profound problem (sin), and the governing theme of God's promise of blessing to all nations. If anyone suggests to you that you don't need the Old Testament (and probably shouldn't be reading this book), remind them that Jesus never read the New Testament, and the first Jesus followers (including the apostle Paul) went out into the world to evangelize, teach, and transform with only the Old Testament Scriptures at first—and did pretty well at it, until Paul started writing his letters and Mark produced his Gospel. Acts four, five, and six of the drama of Scripture all presuppose, build on, refer to, and quote the Scriptures that constitute acts one, two, and three. The whole story only makes sense *as* a whole story.

WHY THESE SEVEN SENTENCES?

Let me offer a word about how I came to choose my seven sentences. The first three more or less chose themselves. We have to begin with creation, as the whole Bible does, and think about what the stories of Genesis 1–11 tell us about the world, about God, about ourselves and our terrible plight as rebels against our Creator.

And then we have to move on to that triggering moment when God calls and chooses Abraham and gives him that promise that really governs the rest of the Bible—through the story of Israel, onward and outward to all nations in the whole earth. Paul calls our second sentence “the gospel” (Galatians 3:8).

From there we have to see the exodus as the greatest event of redemption in the Bible until the cross of Christ. In the same

book we read about the covenant that God makes with Israel and the way of life that he calls the Israelites to observe (the law) in response to God's saving grace. But it is all based on what God has done for them—hence our third sentence.

The fourth was more difficult, since there is a huge chunk of history after the exodus. We can't ignore it, but we can't tell it in full—just a summary. However, in the middle of it comes the next-most important covenant in the Bible—the one God makes with King David, since that points us eventually to King Jesus (as the apostle Paul was fond of saying). David grabbed the fourth sentence.

Having come that far, it seemed that we must tackle the great block of the books of the prophets. That seemed to split into two parts. Much of what the prophets have to say is challenging the people to turn back to God, to live in the way he wants, and warning them that if they do not do so, they will face horrendous judgment and destruction. Thus for our fifth sentence I chose a well-known verse from Micah, one of those prophets who exposes the social depravity and injustice of the nation in contrast to what God truly wants from them. It is a verse that influenced Jesus also (Matthew 23:23) and inspires a lot of Christian ministry and mission today.

But the prophets also bring a message of hope beyond judgment. They have good news to share as they look into God's future, for Israel and for the world, as God will keep his promise through Israel for all the nations on earth. The New Testament word for "gospel" actually comes from the Old Testament (in the Greek translation that was often used in the days of Jesus and the other disciples, especially Paul). My sixth sentence is a gospel word about God's salvation, both for the exiles of Israel and also for "all the ends of the earth." It is a sentence that Paul quotes (Romans 10:15) and has inspired various hymns and songs.

The book of Psalms is probably still the favorite part of the Old Testament for many people, even those who never read much else in the rest of it. As I mentioned above, it is the primary book in the third section of the Hebrew canon, the Writings. It wasn't hard to choose as our seventh sentence what is also probably many people's favorite verse from their favorite psalm. And that provided a way to access both to the book of Psalms itself and the Wisdom books in the same part of our Bible.

Finally, two small points before we plunge in. First, this is a short book, so although I do quote some essential texts, it isn't possible to lay out lengthy quotations of the biblical text. I hope you will enjoy just reading the book itself, but for best results, it really will be helpful, whenever convenient, to read the book with your Bible close at hand so that you can check out some of the references that I have scattered in to support the points being made. After all, the whole point of choosing these seven sentences is to encourage you to read a lot more of them in the Bible itself.

Second, after many years of teaching and writing on the Old Testament, it is not likely that what I think or write for a new book like this will be entirely new. I have taken the liberty of referring in the notes to bigger books by myself and others that can take you deeper and further if you want to. I am also particularly grateful to Zondervan Publishers and Langham Partnership for permission to condense and adapt in a few places in this book some material that was first published in my book *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), also published as *Sweeter than Honey: Preaching the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Preaching Resources, 2016).



- one -

CREATION

*“In the Beginning God Created
the Heavens and the Earth”*

GENESIS 1:1

It’s a good place to start, don’t you think? The first word of the first sentence of the first part of the first book of the first section of the First Testament—“In the beginning” (it’s all one word in Hebrew). Each of those firsts is important.

Our first word, translated “In the beginning,” reminds us that the Bible as a whole is a story, or rather *the* story—the true story of the universe. The whole Bible begins with creation in Genesis 1–2, and it ends (or begins again) with the new creation in Revelation 21–22. And in between it narrates the vast, sprawling narrative of how God has reconciled all things in heaven and earth to himself through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first book in the Bible is Genesis, the book of beginnings. And the first part of the book, Genesis 1–11, tells us of the beginning of the world and the beginning of the nations of humanity. It tells us of the beginning of sin and evil within human life and their effect on the earth itself. All of this is called the Primal History, since it describes things that, although they

happened in a historical sense, cannot be placed in a precisely dated historical time frame. These people and events are primal in the sense that they come first, before the sort of recorded history to which we can give specific dates. Then, in the remainder of the book, Genesis 12–50, we read about the beginning of the people of Israel, through whom God promised to bring blessing into that world of nations and to heal their fractured relationship with God.

The first section of the Old Testament, starting here, comprises the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These five books are the foundation block of the whole Old Testament—indeed, of the whole Bible. In historical terms, they take us from the creation of the universe to the moment when the people of Israel reach the borders of the land God promised them. In terms of our six acts of the great drama of Scripture (see the introduction), they take us through acts one and two and then launch us into act three.

KNOWING THE STORY WE ARE IN

The point about the Bible being one whole big story (or metanarrative) is that it provides our worldview as Christians. A worldview is the way we look at life, the universe, and everything. It is the lens of assumptions through which we interpret all that surrounds us in our daily lives, consciously or (more often) unconsciously within our cultures. Worldviews are formed from the answers given to certain key questions that all human beings ask and answer in some way. Four such worldview questions are these:

1. *Where are we?* What is the material universe we see around us? Where did it come from, or has it always been here? Is it real? Why and how does it exist, and does it have any purpose or destiny?

2. *Who are we?* What does it mean to be human? Are we just the same as the rest of the animals on this planet or different from them in some way? What (if anything) makes us special or unique? Why are we the dominant species, and is that a good or bad thing?
3. *What's gone wrong?* Universally, humans believe that things are not how they are supposed to be, or at least not what they could or should be. We live in the midst of a world gone wrong, between ourselves and between us and the natural order. Why is this? What caused this wrongness to be the dominant reality of human life on earth?
4. *What's the solution?* Universally, humans also seem to believe that things *could* be fixed and made better, and all kinds of solutions are proposed—by religions and philosophies, by politicians and reformers, even by revolutionaries and anarchists. Who is right? Is there anything we can do to solve the human predicament? Is there any escape, or salvation, from the mess we are in? Is there any hope for the world?

Whether you are a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a secular modern atheist, you will ask and answer these questions, in different ways according to the narrative of reality that you hold—the great story that you and your culture tells. But if you are a Jew or a Christian, you will answer all of these questions from the Scriptures. For a Christian that means the overarching story of both Testaments of the Bible. It is the Bible that tells us where we are, who we are, what's gone wrong, what's the solution—and points to a future filled with hope. It gets on with that job very quickly: the Bible sketches in answers to the first three of those fundamental questions within the first three chapters of the Old Testament, expands on the third question for a while in the rest of Genesis 4–11, and then goes on to launch God's answer to the

fourth question in Genesis 12. In other words, the Bible answers those fundamental worldview questions by telling us the true story from the very beginning. Here is the setting (God's creation), the characters (God and the human race), the problem (evil, sin, death), and here is the promise of a solution (through Israel and the Messiah, Jesus).

It will take the rest of the Bible to fill out those answers in multiple ways, of course. But the basic framework of the biblical worldview is set out in the first quarter of Genesis. Here is God's executive summary of his big book, if you like.

WHERE ARE WE?

We look around ourselves as humans and wonder at the astonishing environment of our lives. We look up at skies, clouds, birds, sun, moon, stars. We look around at mountains, rivers, forests, oceans, deserts. We look down at soil, crops, animals wild and domesticated, insects, depths of earth and sea, fish and creatures of the deep. Maybe, with Louis Armstrong, we think to ourselves "What a wonderful world!"—and it is. Awe, fear, admiration, curiosity, gratitude, affection, surprise, expectancy—all these arise in our response to simply being in this world. And the questions arise: Where did all these things come from? Who or what made them? Who or what controls them? How should we relate to them for best results?

Israel lived in a world of nations that had plenty of answers to those questions. The stories of the ancient Near East (especially in Egypt and Babylon) attributed the origins of the natural world to a variety of gods, whose squabbles and needs (mirroring their very human inventors) produced this or that feature of the universe. Certain features of the earth matched the demand of the gods for a home, or temple, within which human beings could

serve their needs. Others resulted from battles between deities when things got split apart.¹

In clear and conscious distinction from these surrounding stories, Genesis 1 tells us where we are. We inhabit the dry land of the earth, which owes its existence to the one single Creator God, along with the seas, the skies above, and the swarming creatures that fill these three great spaces of land, sea, and sky. This one God created all these massive entities and abundant creatures solely by his own powerful word, not in collaboration or conflict with any other deities. This affirmation leads to some vast additional truths about the creation in which we live.

Creation is distinct from God but dependent on God. Our sentence for this chapter, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” tells us that there is a fundamental ontological distinction between God as *Creator* and everything else as *created*.² The heavens and the earth had a beginning. God was there before the beginning. God and the universe are different in their being. This *duality* between the creator and the created is essential to all biblical thought and to a Christian worldview. It stands against both monism (the belief that all reality is One, with no differentiation—as in Advaita Hinduism) and pantheism (the belief that God is somehow identical with the totality of the universe; everything in nature put together is God). This biblical teaching stands against New Age spiritualities, which adopt a broadly monistic or pantheistic worldview.

Creation, then, is distinct from God its Creator, but it is also totally dependent on God. Creation is not independent or co-eternal. The world is not, in biblical teaching, a self-sustaining biosystem. Rather, God is actively and unceasingly sustaining its existence and its functions at macro and micro levels (Psalms 33:6-9; 65:9-13; 104; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). This is not to deny that God has built into the earth an incredible capacity for

renewal, recovery, balance, and adaptation. But the way in which all these systems work and interrelate is itself planned and sustained by God.

Creation is good. This is the unmistakable message of the opening chapter of the Bible. Six times God declares what he has just done to be “good,” and the seventh time “very good.” At least three things follow from this volley of goods.

1. *The good creation reveals the good God.* In other ancient Near Eastern accounts, creation is the work of multiple deities, in varying degrees of conflict and malevolence. By contrast, in the Old Testament creation is the work of the one single living God and therefore bears witness to his existence, power, and character. Creation reveals its Creator, though he is not part of it. Just as you can hear Beethoven in his symphonies (though a symphony is not the composer), or see Rembrandt in his paintings (though a painting is not the artist), so we encounter the living God in creation (though the creation is not God). Creation has a living voice that speaks for God.

We learn that the heavens declare the glory of God, without human speech but a voice that is heard to the ends of the earth (Psalm 19:1-4). Furthermore, “the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice” (Psalm 50:6). It is not only farmers who care for the land. God does so continuously as evidence of his generosity (Psalm 65:9). It is not only humans who receive their food ultimately from God’s hand; so do all creatures (Psalm 104:27-30). Paul points to the kindness of God, on the evidence of his gifts of rain and crops, food and joy (Acts 14:17). He affirms that all human beings can see the evidence of God’s existence and power in the creation of the world (Romans 1:20).

2. *Creation is good in God’s sight.* The repeated affirmation “God saw that it was good” is made quite independently of us human beings. It is not initially *our human* response to the

beauty or benefits of creation (though it certainly should be) but *God's* evaluation of God's own handiwork. It is the seal of God's approval on the whole universe in all its functioning. Creation has intrinsic value because it is valued by God, who is the source of all value. To speak of the goodness of creation is not, first of all, to say that it is valuable to us (which of course it is), but to say that it is valued by God and was created fit for purpose—God's purpose.

Psalm 104 celebrates not only those aspects of creation that serve human needs (crops and domestic animals) but also those that have no immediate connection with human life—the wild places and wild creatures that live there, simply being and doing what God created them to be and do. They are good too, because God values them.

3. *Creation is good as God's temple.* In the ancient world generally, temples were envisaged as (literally) micro-cosms—that is, small representations or replicas on earth of the shape and order of the cosmos itself. A temple was where heaven and earth came together. Meanwhile the cosmos could be seen as a macrotemple—that is, the dwelling place of the gods (or in Old Testament terms, of course, of the one, true, living Creator God).³

From this perspective, when God says that his work of creation is good, it is a way of saying that he sees and approves the whole creation, functioning in all its ordered complexity both as the place prepared for him to install his image (humankind) and as the place for his own dwelling (“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool,” Isaiah 66:1-2—temple language). That is why the imagery of the new creation at the very end of the Bible speaks of the whole of heaven and earth as the dwelling place of God.

Creation is God's property. “The earth is the LORD's” (Psalm 24:1). “To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it” (Deuteronomy

10:14). These are staggering universal affirmations that we easily slip past. The whole universe (including planet Earth) is God's property. It belongs to him. The earth is first and foremost owned by God, not by us. God is the supreme landlord. We are God's tenants, living by God's permission in God's property.⁴ This generates huge ethical implications for our ecological and economic activity, which we can't go into here. But at the very least it reminds us that we are accountable to God for how we treat his property. And if we say that we love God, we should treat what belongs to God with respect and responsibility (as we would the property of anyone we love).

From its very first sentence the Bible constantly speaks of the natural world in relation to God. The created order obeys God, reveals his glory, benefits from his provision, serves his purposes (in judgment or salvation), and is filled with his presence. We honor creation as sacred in that sense—not as something divine in itself, not as something we are to worship (that is explicitly forbidden; see Deuteronomy 4:15-20; Job 31:26-28; Romans 1:25), but because it is related to God in every dimension of its existence.

This is where we are: in God's good creation, tenants in God's property, images of God in God's temple.

WHO ARE WE?

This is God's earth, then. But it is also our earth. "The highest heaven belongs to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind" (Psalm 115:16). The earth is the place of human habitation. It is God's property, but it is also our responsibility. The earth is in some sense given to human beings in a way that it is not given to other animals. So who are we?

What makes us humans special or unique? At first glance, the Bible stresses much more what we have in common with the rest of the animals than anything different from them.

- We are blessed and told to multiply—but so were they, and before us.
- We are created “on the sixth day”—but only after the other wild and domestic animals.
- We are created from the ground, as they were, or rather “from the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:6), which hardly makes us superior.
- We are given the “breath of life”—but so were all the living creatures that breathe (Genesis 1:30; 6:17; 7:18, 22; Psalm 104:29-30).
- We are provided with food by God—but so are they (Genesis 1:29-30).

In fact it is a matter of wonder and rejoicing that we share with all the other animals in the love, care, and provision of God (Psalm 104:14-30). We are *'adam* from the *'adamah* (like humans from the humus, a word meaning “the organic component of soil”). We are all creatures of the Creator God, and that is wonderful.

What, then, makes us different? Three things are affirmed in Genesis: we were created in the image of God in order to be equipped to exercise dominion within creation (Genesis 1:26-28); we were placed in the earth (initially in the garden in Eden), in order to serve and care for it (Genesis 2:15); and we were created male and female to help one another in these huge responsibilities (Genesis 1:27; 2:18-25). Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Created to rule (Genesis 1:26-28): Kings, in the image of God.

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
 in the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The grammar of these verses implies that God creates human beings *with the intention* that they should exercise rule over the rest of the animal creation, and that he creates us in the image of God in order to equip us for that function. The two things (image of God and dominion over creation) are not identical with each other, but they are closely related: the first enables the second.⁵

We were created to exercise the delegated kingship of God within creation. Just as emperors set up statues (images) of themselves in the countries they ruled to indicate their authority over those realms, so human beings as the image of God represent the authority of the real king.

But how does God exercise his kingship within creation? The Psalms tell us. Psalm 104 says that God does so by caring and providing for all his creatures, wild, domestic, and human. Psalm 145 (which is addressed to “my God the King”) says that God rules by being gracious, good, faithful, generous, protective, and loving toward all he has made.

That is how *God* is king. Therefore, human rule in creation was never a license to dominate, abuse, crush, waste, or destroy. That is tyranny modeled on fallen human arrogance, not kingship modeled on God’s character and behavior. The true model of kingship is summarized in 1 Kings 12:7 (“If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them . . .”): mutual servanthood. The people will serve the king—yes, provided he will

serve and care for them without injustice. The earth will serve our needs—yes, provided we exercise our kingship in God’s way by serving and caring for it.

Located to serve (Genesis 2:15): Priests, in the service of creation. This follows naturally from the point above. God takes the man he has created and puts him in the garden (literally) “to work it and take care of it.” Human rule within creation (Genesis 1) is to be exercised by human servanthood for creation (Genesis 2). The pattern of servant-kingship is very clear, and it is modeled perfectly of course by Jesus himself, the perfect human and the Son of God, when he deliberately demonstrates his status as Lord and Master by washing the disciples’ feet. Kingship exercised in servanthood: that is Christ’s way, and it should be ours too.

But the language of serving and keeping has another resonance. It is the language of priesthood. Repeatedly in Leviticus it is said that the task of the priests and Levites is to serve God in the tabernacle/temple and to keep all that God has entrusted to them there. We have, then, a priestly role as well as a kingly role within creation. We have authority to rule, and we have responsibility to serve.

Thus the language of God placing his image (human beings) within creation has temple overtones as well, for that is where the images of the gods were indeed placed—in their temples. With the cosmos functioning as the macrotemple of its Creator, God places his own image—the living human being—in his temple to dwell with him there. Creation functions as the dwelling place of God, and human beings function as the image of God, ruling and serving creation on his behalf.

Created in relationship, male and female, for our task in creation. The first two chapters of Genesis give us two different but quite complementary portrayals of what it means to be male and female.

Genesis 1, on the one hand, tells us that for human beings being male and female is closely linked to being created in God's image.

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

The way this verse is structured, with its tight parallelism, shows that there is something about our gender complementarity (male and female) that reflects something true about God. That's to say, being male and female *humans* means more than just enabling us to mate and reproduce like the rest of the animals. Human sexuality is part of what it means to be the image of God (says the verse). Not that God is gendered or sexually differentiated, but that *personal relationship* is part of the essential nature of God and therefore also part of the essential nature of humanity, since we were created in his image. Human sexual complementarity and the personal relationships it enables reflect *within the created order* something that is true about God within his uncreated, divine being.

Genesis 2, on the other hand, sets our maleness and femaleness in the context of the human task, as described above. God has called his whole creation "good" and "very good." It comes as a shock, then, when he announces that something is "not good" (Genesis 2:18). What is not good is that the man (the "earth creature") should be alone. But in the immediate context, the problem of this aloneness is not merely that he would therefore be lonely, in an emotional sense. God is addressing not merely a psychological problem but a creational one.

God has given an immense task to this creature in Genesis 2:15. He has been put in the garden "to work it and take care of it." When we add this to the task specified in the earlier creation

account—to “fill the earth and subdue it” and to rule over the rest of the animate creation (Genesis 1:28)—the human task seems limitless. A man cannot tackle such a challenge alone. That is “not good.” He needs help. God sets out, not to find him a *companion* to stop him feeling lonely, but to find a “*helper* to stand alongside and equal to” him in this huge task laid on him as the servant, keeper, filler, subduer, and ruler of creation. The man doesn’t just need company. He needs help.⁶ Male and female are necessary, not only for mutual relationship in which they will reflect God (though certainly for that), but also for mutual help in carrying out the creation mandate entrusted to humanity.

Humanity, then, is created in relationship, for relationship, and for a task that requires relational cooperation—not only at the basic biological level that only a man and a woman can produce children in order to fill the earth, but also at the wider societal level that both men and women have their roles of mutual assistance in the great task of ruling the creation on God’s behalf.

WHAT’S GONE WRONG?

Things do not continue as God intended. Sin enters human life through rebellion and disobedience. The profound simplicity of the narratives of Genesis 3–11 shows us at least three things about sin that the rest of the Bible presupposes and demonstrates in so many ways.

Sin infects every part of life for every human being. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us more about ourselves as human beings as well as that we are created in God’s image for the reasons mentioned above.

Human beings are *physical* (we are creatures in the created physical world); *spiritual* (we have a unique intimacy of relationship with God); *rational* (we have unique powers of communication,

language, addressability, consciousness, memory, emotions, and will); and *social* (being male and female reflects the relational dimension of God and underlies all human relationships). All of these dimensions are combined in the integrated human person. They are not different parts that can be separated but different dimensions of the whole person.

The story of the temptation of Eve (with Adam's collusion—he is there “with her”; see Genesis 3:6) involves all four of these dimensions of human life, showing how sin enters into all of them.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:1-6)

- Spiritually, Eve begins to doubt the truth and goodness of God, undermining her trust and obedience.
- Mentally, she contemplates the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: her thinking is rational (it is good for food), aesthetic (it is pleasing to the eye), and intellectual

(it is desirable for gaining wisdom). All these capacities of the human mind are good in themselves. Indeed, the Bible commends them as good gifts of God. There is nothing wrong with Eve using her mind; the problem is she is now using all its powers *in a direction that was forbidden by God*. The problem is not rationality but disobedience.

- Physically, “she took and ate.” These simple verbs describe physical action in the physical world. She uses her hands and mouth to commit an act of disobedience.
- Socially, she shares the fruit with Adam, “who was with her.” Adam goes along with it. He hears the conversation but does nothing to challenge it. And so the sin that is already spiritual, mental, and physical also becomes shared—it enters into the core of human relationship, producing shame and fear.

The Bible will go on to show how sin continues to corrupt these same four dimensions of human life and experience.

- Spiritually, we are alienated from God, fearful of God’s presence, suspicious of God’s truth, hostile to God’s love.
- Rationally, we use our minds, like the first human couple, to rationalize and justify our sin, blame others and excuse ourselves. We have become darkened in our thinking.
- Physically, we are sentenced to death, as God decreed, and suffer death’s invasion through sickness and decay even in life itself, while our whole physical environment likewise groans in futility under God’s curse.
- Socially, human life is fractured at every level, with anger, jealousy, violence, and murder even between brothers in the story of Cain and Abel escalating into the horrendous social decay and international strife that the rest of the biblical narrative graphically portrays.

Romans 1:18-32 is Paul's incisive commentary on the universal reign of sin in human life and society. Reading his searing analysis there, we can see all of the same four dimensions of human personality involved in human sin and rebellion. There is no part of the human person that is unaffected by sin. Sin is a kind of power that exercises its dominion over us—until it is defeated by Christ on the cross.

Sin affects the earth. When human beings choose to rebel against their Creator, their disobedience and fall affects the whole of their physical environment. This is immediately clear from God's words to Adam, "cursed is the ground because of you" (Genesis 3:17). This was inevitable. We are not only part of the whole interdependent system of life on earth; we are the dominant species. When humanity rebels against God, the rest of the created order suffers the effect. Not only are we alienated from God; not only are we alienated from an environment that often seems hostile and resistant; but also the earth itself is subject to frustration, as Paul also puts it—unable to freely and fully glorify God as it was created to do, until both we and it are liberated from that curse (Romans 8:19-23).

These early chapters of Genesis show that the problem is not only sinful human beings living in rebellion against God, but also the cursed earth that is the location of their evil and is contributing to their suffering. For example, when Lamech (the one descended from Seth, not Cain) has a son, he names him Noah (which means "rest" or "comfort"), saying, "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed" (Genesis 5:29). That is the longing of humanity—for God to lift the curse on the earth. It does not happen in the lifetime of Lamech's son, however (it will not happen until the end of the story, in Revelation 22:3). On the contrary, God's judgment falls in the form of the flood, specifically on the earth

WHAT DOES THE CURSE ON THE GROUND REFER TO?

I do not think that we should regard the fall of humanity into sin and God's curse on the earth as the cause of all the phenomena in nature that can be threatening to human life, if we are around when they happen (earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, tsunamis, etc.). Those natural processes, when the tectonic plates of the earth's crust shift, are and always have been part of the way this planet is structured—long before human beings arrived and fell into sin. More than that, they are a necessary part of the conditions for human life (all life on earth, in fact). Without the shifting of tectonic plates there would be no mountains. Without mountains there be no precipitation, rivers, and variable climate. Without volcanoes, rivers, and floods, there would be no fertile soil. These are geological and climatic realities. We can hardly dictate to God how he ought to have made the world.⁷

I think the curse on the ground refers to the soil, the surface of the earth on which we live and depend (that is the common meaning of the word '*adamah*' in Genesis 3:17), rather than to the whole planet. It is a functional curse, in which our human relationship with the earth we live on is radically distorted by sin and evil. The earth fights back. We have to sweat and toil just to eat bread. At one level, the curse on the earth is a way of describing the obvious fact that we humans are at odds with our natural environment, in multiple ways that harm both us and it.

But also, Paul tells us that creation itself is frustrated in its primary function to glorify God (Romans 8:20). Yes, as the Psalms say, creation does still declare the glory of God, but it cannot (yet) do so as fully as God intended because it is subject to the same kind of futility and frustration that blights human life also through our sin and rebellion. But the great good news (the gospel) of the whole Bible story is that *creation as a whole* is included in God's great plan of salvation. Our destiny in Christ is not to be saved *out of the earth* and go somewhere else, but rather to be saved, redeemed, *along with the whole creation*, which has been reconciled to God through the blood of Christ shed on the cross. (Psalm 96:11-13; Isaiah 65:17-25; Romans 8:18-25; Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:15-20; Revelation 21–22). And in that new creation, "no longer will there be any curse" (Revelation 22:3).

and its creatures as well as on sinful humanity (Genesis 6:6-7, 13, 17). Sin brings God's judgment on creation as well as humanity—for we are bound together. We are bound together also when God's grace brings salvation to creation as well as humanity—but that's the longer story.

Sin permeates human society and history. The narrative of Genesis 4–11 grinds on with increasing wickedness. The first family sees the eruption of jealousy, anger, and murder between brothers (Cain and Abel). The generations after Cain mix cultural development with boasting and escalating violence (Genesis 4:19-24). Generations pass, with the tolling bell of death terminating every one of them, no matter how long their lives (Genesis 5). The whole of human society becomes a mass of violence and corruption (Genesis 6:5, 11-13). Even after the purging waters of the flood and the emergence of a fresh start for creation, with God's words of blessing echoing Genesis 1, sin rebounds again in the family of Noah (Genesis 9:18-29). And the primal narrative reaches its climax at Babel, with the whole world of nations confused, divided, and scattered across the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

The picture is two dimensional: sin spreads horizontally within society, and sin escalates vertically between generations. Human life and cultures become increasingly laden with collective sin. That collective sin somehow consolidates into a power or force that is much more than the fact that all of us individually are sinners. Sin becomes endemic, structural, and embedded in history. The history books of the Old Testament tell the lurid story of how things get worse and worse in Israel as generations go by. The prophets see not only the sin of individuals but the way society as a whole has become rotten and corrupt. Isaiah, for example, attacks those who legalize injustice by passing laws that give structural legitimacy to oppression:

Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
to deprive the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people.
(Isaiah 10:1-2)

Every king in Jerusalem seems to be worse than the one before (with very few exceptions, such as Hezekiah and Josiah) until the weight of accumulated evil became simply intolerable to God.

These stories in the Primal History, then, contain enormous depths of truth about the triangle of relationships between God, humanity, and the whole created order. The Bible offers us a radical and profound assessment of the effects of our willful rebellion and fall into disobedience, self-centeredness, and sin. It is not just that every dimension of the human person is affected by sin. It is not just that every human person is a sinner. It is also the case that our social and economic relationships with each other, horizontally and historically, and our ecological relationship to the earth itself have all been perverted and twisted by our collective sin, our idolatry, and our collusion with satanic powers of evil.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

The answers to our first three questions have produced a vast problem on a cosmic scale. We live in God's creation, but we have spoiled it with our sin. We are made in God's image, but we fail to reflect the character of God. We live as a multitude of nations and cultures, but we have used ethnic diversity as a cause of hatred, violence, and injustice among nations. We are individually sinful and disobedient to the God who created us, provides for us, and loves us. We are, as Paul says, slaves to the dominion of sin. In all of these dimensions, the whole earth stands under the judgment of God.

If there is to be any solution to these desperate predicaments, it cannot come from us. We are too radically flawed to provide the answer to our own mess, as millennia of human history have demonstrated. It is important to see that the Bible portrays this whole problem, not by asking the question “How can we all get to heaven when we die?” Our texts do not talk about the need for us to go somewhere else to be with God and how can we do that, since we are so sinful. The problem is, How can the holy and loving Creator God once again dwell in harmony with the humans he created in his own image in the midst of the earth that is now subject to God’s curse? How can we be and do within God’s creation what we were created to be and do? How can God once again walk and talk with us in the garden, now that we are rebels against him? That is the problem the whole Bible addresses—and ultimately solves, since the grand climactic vision of the Bible is not about us all going somewhere else (“up to heaven”) but about *God coming here to dwell with us*, with all those redeemed by the blood of Christ from every nation, in the unified heaven and earth of the new creation, purged of all sin and evil.

This is the solution that God alone provides, since we cannot. It is the solution that the whole Bible story, centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, will present as gospel, as good news. And it is the solution that will address all three of those great needs: the sinfulness of every individual, the brokenness of the nations, and the curse and frustration of the earth. There are hints and signposts of these things in the Primal History, but we can see them more clearly in the light of what follows, in our next chapter.