

JON NIELSON

TRACING GOD'S STORY

AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

**TRACING GOD'S
STORY WORKBOOK**

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An Introduction to
Biblical Theology

JON NIELSON

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

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INTRODUCTION

This workbook is intended to be used as a companion to the book *Tracing God's Story: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. I hope that it will be useful to you as you get to know the Bible as *one unified story of God's redemptive work through his Son, Jesus Christ*.

That, really, is the purpose of this project: I hope to help God's people see the wonderful unity of Scripture that was intended by the divine author who inspired each of the human biblical authors. The Bible is made up of sixty-six books, written by more than forty human authors, and yet it tells a remarkably unified story of God's creation, humanity's fall, God's great saving work through his Son Jesus, and the ultimate hope for restoration—a final judgment, and then a new heaven and new earth where God's people will live with him forever. I hope the book—and this workbook—will help you study the Bible as one grand story!

To get the most out of this workbook, I encourage you to work through it as you read the book (and the biblical passages) carefully and thoroughly. Answer the questions fully and thoughtfully; the harder you work, the more you'll get out of this study. We'll begin in the book of Genesis and trace the story of the Bible all the way through to Revelation, seeking to keep in mind our place in the story at each step along the way.

It is my hope and prayer that by the end of your work through *Tracing God's Story*, you will understand the shape of Scripture more fully and love God's word more than ever before.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

What exactly 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 one 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 how Jesus himself pointed toward this kind of understanding of Scripture.

So our goal in this workbook (and the accompanying book) is to do biblical theology. We will trace God’s story of redemption as it is revealed progressively in Scripture.

Respond to the following questions as you begin your study of biblical theology:

1. How did Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost (see Acts 2), use the Old Testament to point to a right understanding of Jesus Christ?

2. How does Peter's approach affect the way that we should expect to read and understand a book like Psalms in the Old Testament?

3. What was the response of the people in Jerusalem when they heard Peter's sermon?

FOUNDATIONS FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Review pages 2–3 in *Tracing God's Story*

Why do we affirm that the Bible is one story of God's saving work in the world? Why do we insist that Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the Bible—the very center of the Bible story? Why does biblical theology seek to understand God's unfolding plan of salvation, which is progressively revealed in Scripture? One answer to these questions, which you'll see in your Bible reading, is this: *Jesus himself* 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 the Old Testament Scriptures.

1. What did Jesus say about his suffering and death to the two men who met him on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection (Luke 24:25–27)?

2. What does Luke say that Jesus did next? How does Luke describe the “sermon” that Jesus gave to the two men (Luke 24:28–32)?

3. What does this passage mean for us as we consider the discipline of biblical theology?

The Apostles’ Preaching

Review pages 5–6 in *Tracing God’s Story*

In his sermon in Acts 2, Peter used Old Testament Scriptures—specifically, the Psalms and the prophet Joel—to show what was really happening on the day of Pentecost: God’s promised Spirit was being poured out as he had promised through Joel and in accordance with David’s descendant being raised from the dead and crowned king (Ps. 16). Acts 2, then, is another key passage for helping us understand 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 in 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.

1. In what ways did Peter connect the work of Jesus Christ to the promises of God in the Old Testament? What passages did he quote as he explained what Jesus accomplished?

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2. How did Peter use Psalm 16? In what ways did Peter claim that this psalm pointed ahead to the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

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3. What does Peter's approach to this sermon tell us about the way we should read the Old Testament?

Old Testament "Pointers"

Review pages 6–7 in *Tracing God's Story*

God intentionally designed Old Testament rituals to point us to Christ. This is clearly the argument of the author of the book of Hebrews. The way that God set things up under the Levitical priesthood was not random. It was meant to show God's people about the need for Christ's work and to teach them about the final salvation that was coming in God's own Son. This means we can learn much about Christ and his work by understanding the Old Testament. A careful study of the priestly duties and functions, for example, can teach us about what Jesus accomplished for sinners on the cross.

Therefore, biblical theology reminds us that all of Scripture is valuable for showing us the beauty of the gospel. All of the Bible is from God, and it is all meant to show Christ in all his beauty, glory, and salvation to lost sinners.

1. In what way does the author of Hebrews describe the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ (see Heb. 8)?

2. How does this passage use the Old Testament role and picture of a priest to show us the beauty and power of Jesus's work?

3. What can this passage teach us about our approach to the Old Testament?

The Unity of the Bible

Review pages 7–8 in *Tracing God's Story*

As we look at the book of Revelation, we begin to see an important foundation for biblical theology: the Bible story ends in a way that relates to all that has come before. There are echoes of Genesis in Revelation, as well as pictures and events from 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 closely it is connected to all that has come before in the Bible story (Old Testament and New Testament), it is very difficult to not see that

CHAPTER 1

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 is God's great story, and it hangs together perfectly.

1. What aspects of the descriptions of the perfect city in Revelation 21–22—this new heaven and new earth—connect to other parts of the Bible story with which you are familiar?

2. What do these connections tell you about the Bible as one unified work—one big story of God's saving work in the world?

3. How is this passage evidence for the legitimacy of the discipline of biblical theology?

THE VALUE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Review pages 9–10 in *Tracing God's Story*

Biblical theology is most helpful for 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 develops. Biblical theology

studies the Bible as it is revealed to us—not in systematic categories, but in books—in one developing story. It can help 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.

1. What do we learn from Jesus’s words in Luke 4:16–30 about his understanding of his role and ministry in relation to Old Testament prophecy?

2. Why is this passage a good example of Jesus himself “doing” biblical theology?

3. How would you argue that biblical theology is an important discipline for Christians—alongside systematic and historical theology?

THE “JOURNEY” OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Review pages 10–11 in *Tracing God’s Story*

If we fail to make the full “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 us,” we will fail to properly apply the meaning of Scripture to our lives as Christians. We need to take every step as we study every passage in the Bible.

1. Why might some people be tempted to skip an important step in studying the Bible—and which steps tend to be skipped most often, in your opinion?

2. How is it helpful for students of the Bible to take the full journey of biblical theological study, moving all the way from the text of Scripture itself to the historical context to the legitimate connection to Jesus Christ and finally to the implications for our lives as we follow him?

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL

Review pages 12–13 in *Tracing God’s Story*

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. We begin to see, through a biblical theological perspective, 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 understand 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 Jesus.

1. Paul repeats the phrase “in accordance with the Scriptures” twice in his explanation of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4. What is the significance of this phrase? What is Paul saying about the work of Jesus Christ as it relates to the rest of the Bible?

2. How can Jesus’s death on the cross be “in accordance with the Scriptures”? What does this mean?

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

Review pages 14–15 in *Tracing God’s Story*

It is the study of biblical theology that can best help you—as a follower of God today—place yourself in the story of God’s work in the world 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 great Savior, we begin to see that we are living in the final chapter of that story—along with God’s people who followed Jesus from the first days of the early church till now. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become part of the people 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; we will share eternal life with David, Jacob, and Daniel!

1. If you assumed that the doctrine of inspiration was *not* true, and that Psalm 16 was a random poem with no connection to the rest of the Bible, how might you interpret it? What would you make of verse 10? Would you be able to explain it?

2. What changes about the interpretation of this psalm when you see the Bible as one story, with its climax in Jesus Christ as the eternal King and Savior?



RECAP

We see from the example of Jesus Christ himself that it is legitimate to read the Bible as one story woven together in all of its parts by the sovereign and saving purposes of God. We trust God—the divine author of Scripture—that his word is unified and consistent throughout all its parts.



SO WHAT?

As you conclude this chapter, jot down answers to the following application questions:

1. In what ways are the foundations of biblical theology (from Jesus and the apostles) personally encouraging to you?

2. How can these foundations help you grow in your faith?

PART 1

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Chapter 2

GOD'S CREATION AND A CRISIS PART 1

In chapter 2 of *Tracing God's Story*, we begin to move through the big story of the Bible. The story begins with God's creation of all things, which is followed quickly by a terrible crisis (as we will see in chapter 3).

THE GOD WHO CREATES

Review pages 20–21 in *Tracing God's Story*

The account of creation, ultimately, is the foundation and starting point for the big story of God's work in the world. It sets God up as the Creator, and everything else in the story flows out of this foundational truth. The most basic acknowledgment that humans can make as they seek to relate to God—as well as discover their purpose, meaning in life, and calling—is that God is the Creator and they are his creatures. 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 even begins to get to know God, it is important to start with this basic admission: “I am a creature, made by the Creator God.”

1. What are some of your observations about the first two verses in the Bible? What jumps out at you immediately from these verses?

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2. What is the significance of the fact that the Bible begins with God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth? What are some of the implications of this simple, but huge, truth?

THE ETERNAL CREATOR GOD

Review pages 21–22 in *Tracing God’s Story*

Genesis 1 begins simply with these words: “In the beginning, God . . .” This simple introduction to this 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 eternal glory, splendor, and power. There has never been a time—ever—when God did not exist. There was a time when you did not yet exist. There was a time when this entire world—even the whole universe—did not exist. God, though, is eternal; he has always existed in his perfect being, glory, and holiness. This concept stretches our minds, but it remains far beyond our capacity as humans to completely grasp it. In the beginning, before anything existed, God was there; he chose to create the universe and the reality that we now know and see all around us.

1. According to Genesis 1:1, what sets God apart from everything else in the universe? Why is this truth so significant for us to understand?

2. What is the right response to the God who has existed from eternity and who created the heavens and the earth, according to Revelation 4?

3. What are some ways that you can apply these passages to your life today—particularly in the way that you think about (and approach) the one true God?

GOD CREATES EX NIHILO BY SPEAKING

Review pages 23–25 in *Tracing God’s Story*

Genesis 1 and Hebrews 11 teach the important and fundamental truth that when God created the world, he created 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 thin air—although there was not even air before the world existed! Furthermore, God did not create the world with his “hands.” Hebrews, as well as the rest of the Genesis creation account, tells us this important truth: God created the universe by the power of his word. 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 literally spoke reality into existence. His word is incredibly powerful; it has *creative* power. This is truly a great God; he is the rightful King of all.

Notice, too, the amazing order that God displayed as he created the world. Carefully, with great wisdom, he ordained each “light” in the “expanse” of the heavens (Gen. 1:14–15) to have its proper place and time, and he separated the land from the waters in perfect

CHAPTER 2

ratios. God, we see, is a God of careful planning and wise ordering of every detail of his creation. As the account of God's creation goes on, we see that he is completely in control of every aspect. He speaks and things happen. Lights appear in the heavens; waters swarm with living creatures; animals begin 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.

1. How did God create the world, according to Hebrews 11? Why is this so hard for us to understand and imagine?

2. What do we learn about God from Genesis 1, which records his creation of the world?

3. How do you see the order and organization of a wise God, as it is revealed in Genesis 1?

THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

Review pages 27–28 in *Tracing God's Story*

The world in which we live 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” several times in Genesis 1 tells us that he made it with great care, attention to detail, and beauty. God was very intentional about his creation; he worked to make it good in exactly the way he intended. Think about this for a moment: the God of the universe stopped, admired his work, and declared it to be good. That is amazing.

In addition, we can see from these repeated phrases that God was very pleased with this world that he had made. He had not created it from any need that he had for companionship or entertainment; yet he delighted in it. The creation brought delight to the heart of the Creator who had made it all to be “good.”

1. What are some of the repeated phrases that you observe in the creation account? List them here.

2. What is the significance of the repeated phrase “And God saw that it was good”? Why is that an important phrase in this account?

3. What can we conclude about God’s world based on this repeated phrase?

GOD CREATES HUMANS IN THE *IMAGO DEI*

Review pages 28–30 in *Tracing God’s Story*

Human beings are special. I don’t mean they are special in a “feel-good” way—the way that parents tell their toddlers that they are special. I mean that humans are special and dear to God in a way that is set apart from every other part of his creation. God actively and personally engaged in the creation of human beings in a special way. That means they are unique. They are distinct from the animal world—set apart by the Creator God as uniquely intelligent and designed beings. Indeed, human beings are the focal point of God’s creation.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that human beings were created in “the image of God” (the *imago Dei*). This does not mean that we literally resemble God physically. But it does mean that we reflect him in some ways; we are “like” God—not perfectly, but in ways that reflect the way that he really is. The text of Genesis also tells us that human beings were made as “male and female,” and both genders are in the image of God. Our personalities, capacities, and relationships point to him in significant ways.

1. What aspects of the way that God talked about the creation of human beings sets apart this phase of creation as more personal to him than all the rest?

2. How did God, in Genesis 1, describe the creation of human beings? What is the language that he uses as he talks to “himself” in the context of the Trinity?

3. In Psalm 8, how does David express the exalted place that God gave to human beings in his creation? How does Psalm 8 help us understand the glorious role of human beings in this world that God has made?

HUMANS' ROLE IN CREATION

Review pages 32–33 in *Tracing God's Story*

God gave Adam and Eve instructions to “multiply” and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). God’s goal in the creation of men and women was obviously to have them create a great race of human beings—people for his own glory and pleasure. This creation “mandate” tells human beings to create more human beings in order to fill the earth with people made in God’s image. God also called human beings to “subdue” the earth and to have “dominion” over all the other living creatures on the earth (v. 28).

1. What is surprising to you about God’s “charge” to human beings in Genesis 1:28–31? Does anything stand out to you in a new way as you read this passage?

2. In Psalm 8, how does David explain God’s intended role for human beings? What is David’s response to God as he considers this great responsibility?

GOD'S REST

Review pages 34–35 in *Tracing God's Story*

Genesis 2:2 tells us that God rested on the seventh day of the creation week. This means that God intentionally *stopped* his work of creation. In other words, his creative work in this world was finished. God is still working in many ways, but after the sixth day ended, he really did stop his work of creation in the world and declared it to be “very good” (1:31). 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 too—a “holy” day that would be devoted not only to rest but also to the worship of their God (2:3).

1. What seems to have been the reason for God’s rest on the seventh day? Does the text of Genesis 1–2 give us any explanation for this?

2. How did God give special significance to this seventh day? How does Genesis 2 show us this?

3. What do you know about the relationship of the “Sabbath” to this seventh day of creation?

 **RECAP**

In this chapter, we've started with the fundamental truths of the Bible 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.

 **SO WHAT?**

As you conclude this chapter, jot down answers to the following application question:

1. God is the Creator and King of this world. What implications of this truth for the world, human beings, and yourself can you think of? Write down as many as you can.
