

CONTENTS

Taste and See	9
PART 1 THE BIBLE IS . . .	
1. An Epic Story	17
2. Meant to Transform Hearts	31
PART 2 TRANSFORMING BIBLE STUDY	
3. Rules, Rules, and More Rules (Law)	39
4. This Is a Story All about How . . . (Old Testament Narrative)	51
5. Prayers and Songs (Poetry)	63
6. A Word from the Wise (Wisdom)	77
7. Visions of the Future (Prophecy)	91
8. The Good News (Gospels)	103
9. Snail Mail (Epistles)	117
10. The Scary Stuff (Apocalyptic)	131
11. A Word on Context	141
Acknowledgments	145
Notes	147



THE BIBLE IS . . .

An Epic Story

“Think of what you have done and rejoice,
for you have rid the land of a great evil.”

CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI, ERAGON

What kind of book is the Bible? Is it B.I.B.L.E. (Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth)? Is it a recipe book showing you how to put a bunch of ingredients together resulting in a tasty treat? Is it a massive whodunit book that provides clues about a mysterious character or set of events you won't understand fully until you get to the end? Is it fact or fiction? Literal or figurative? Prose or poetry? Many people have attempted to distill what the Bible is through common analogies that all break down at some point. So we begin *Literarily* based on what God Himself says about His Word. The Bible is wholly true and fully reliable (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). It is inspired truth meant to clearly articulate who Christ is so that our hearts are transformed to know and love Him deeply and to live for Him fully.

The Bible is a message from God written in epic fashion as a collection of anthologies to chronicle the story of Jesus' redemption of sinners and His appeal for us to live considering His work on our behalf. An epic is a very long poem that tells a story. In an epic story, virtue drives the hero. He or she works to serve the greater good. We are drawn to our heroes' world. Their interests become our interests; their passions become our passions.

In the Eragon fantasy book series, a young boy named Eragon and his dragon, Saphira, embark on a mission to bring the entire world of Alagaesia out from under the evil influence of Galbatorix. The world of Alagaesia is comprised of various people groups—dwarves, elves, Urgals, dragons, and humans. Their cultures and interests are at odds with each other, but they are challenged to lay those differences aside to defeat the encroachment of Galbatorix. None of their cultures will survive if he is allowed to reign unchecked. Galbatorix has stolen what is most precious to these societies to amass unrivaled power for himself. It soon becomes clear that the fate of Alagaesia will rest on Eragon. Can he and Saphira find a way to defeat Galbatorix? Unbeknownst to Eragon, a powerful force has guided and helped him along his journey. It is only when his need is most desperate that he is made aware of the guidance of this force. Even then, Eragon used every worldly means in his attempt to destroy Galbatorix. In the end, it would not be through might that evil would be destroyed. Evil would finally be destroyed through a breaking of mind and spirit.¹

Every epic good-versus-evil story, like *Eragon*, reminds me of the story of Scripture, the truest and most heroic and epic story that has ever been known. The Bible is one epic story,

organized as an anthology. Traditionally, an epic is presented as a poem. The Bible is not a poem (though it has lots of poetry in it), but it contains many of the other elements of an epic. It's otherworldly, ancient, and heroic, with strong themes of bravery and overcoming great odds for the benefit of humanity. It focuses on overcoming intense trials in view of a glorious future. Though there are many stories and books and themes, and though it spans thousands of years, it's written by the finger of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and all about one person, the Lord Jesus, and how from Him and through Him, and to Him are all things. Jesus breaks into a world full of competing interests. For Christians, the interests of Jesus become our interests. His passion, to take the gospel to the whole world, becomes our passion. He is our ultimate hero who lived a perfect life, died to save humanity from our sins and the sinful influence of the world and Satan, rose three days after death to showcase His power over death and the resurrection life that exists for those who believe in Him, and left us the deposit of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us to know Him and live for Him.

GOD SPEAKS

The Word tells us that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The profitability of the Bible is based on its divine origin, not just that there's good information to pull from, but that it contains ultimate truth and absolute authority. God Himself breathed out the words into the hearts and minds of prophets, historians, pastors, apostles, and even prisoners! These messengers

wrote, not by their own will, but by God's will as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

God makes His eternal power and divinity known through the things we see in creation, so that we must testify to a basic knowledge of God that helps us know He exists, He is powerful, and He is divine. However, this knowledge alone is a great start but not sufficient in leading us to salvation in Christ. This is why the Word of God is necessary. If we could only know God through creation and without the aid of His Word and the work of His Spirit, we would be left in our sins. The fullness of God's revelation of Himself is through the Word. God not only *shows* us that He exists, but He *tells* us! The God of the universe spoke the world into existence. He created light and sky and land and sea and vegetation and the sun and the moon and stars and all manner of creatures in land, sea, and sky. This culminated in calling forth humanity to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill and subdue and maintain dominion and stewardship over all His creation. Into this world, He called His Son Jesus to be born in the womb of a virgin, and to live more than thirty years in complete obedience to Him, before dying on a cross to atone for the sins of humanity. Christ is the Word who was with God from the beginning (John 1:1) and who is indeed God made flesh (John 1:14). Jesus Christ and the gospel He brings is the full and final Word of God to humanity.

As a kid, I loved Friday and Saturday night boxing matches. My dad and I would prepare for a big event by baking our favorite boxed, yellow cake mix with loads of chocolate icing, and covering the entire cake with pecan halves. We devoured big slices of the warm, gooey cake with a huge scoop of butter pecan ice cream while watching fighters work their way up

the ranks to win all the world title belts in their weight class, in hopes of one day becoming the next “undisputed world champion” in boxing. I can mark my childhood by celebrating the victories of boxing greats like Muhammad Ali, Evander Holyfield, Marvin Hagler, and Roy Jones, Jr. An undisputed champion is without rival, fully accepted, undeniable. God’s Word is also indisputable, eclipsing all other sacred writings. No other religious or secular text has ever come close to the Bible in its accuracy, trustworthiness, or its authority over all creation. Why is this? It’s not because someone wrote the Bible, laid it beside other great works, and found it to be the best among equals. It’s because the Bible is not a mere book. It is, in essence, without error and without rival because God breathed truth into hearts and minds, onto scrolls, and in ink through men as they were carried along by God’s Spirit.

Think of all the things you’ve verbalized or thought you needed in the past twenty-four hours. Here are some of the things I’ve said I need today. I need a break. I need chocolate. I need time to myself. I need to stretch my legs. I need to figure out what we’re going to eat for dinner. I need to pick up my son from soccer practice. I need to respond to a text message. I need a new pair of jeans to replace my ripped ones (although ripped jeans are in fashion so maybe I’ll keep them). I need a massage. And it’s only the middle of the afternoon! There’s so much day left and so many more “needs” to come! God’s Word meets our most pressing spiritual needs while He also promises to care for our physical (Matthew 6:30) and emotional needs (Isaiah 26:3). The Lord gives us what we need for our soul’s satisfaction. His Word awakens us to His grace and mercy and offers us wisdom and joy and enlightenment. Through the Word of God, we are warned against sin, en-

couraged to be discerning, and shown the blessings of righteous and holy living as we await our eternal reward.

Any decent chef will tell you the most important tool in the kitchen is a good, sharp chef's knife. Believe it or not, a dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp one. It takes way more effort to use a dull knife. The knife is more likely to slip off the item being cut, creating a higher chance of injury. A sharp knife is precise. It cuts clean through flesh and bone. And so it is with God's Word. We're told in Hebrews 4 that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). This verse comes at the end of a long section on Sabbath rest. We're told in verse 11 that we are to strive to enter God's rest, which is ours when we believe in Christ. We enter His rest when we cease from our strivings and self-effort and depend on Him for strength, wisdom, grace, and more. Rest does not mean inactivity. The Word is active. It works, but we rest. We rest in the finished work of Christ. We rest in His care. We rest in knowing God's Word probes and exposes every thought and intention of our hearts and is effective in accomplishing all His purposes in our lives.

GOD RULES

In an old episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, one of the characters was an AI life form named Data. In one episode, Data decided to pursue a romantic relationship with a human colleague to explore human intimacy. His new girlfriend says to Data, "You give me so much. You spend time with me when I'm lonely. You encourage me when I'm down.

No man has ever been kinder to me.” It’s obvious she’s developed feelings for him. However, Data’s programming doesn’t give him the capacity for romantic love. He decides to create a program with a specific “subroutine” devoted specifically to the development of this relationship.² Regardless of how hard he tried, Data’s advances toward his new girlfriend could only be artificially contrived.

Data’s attempts are nothing like a relationship with God. Though we can’t see Him, God is not robotic in His relationships with His people. Yes, He rules creation and all life, but He does so out of an abundance of love. He’s not programming ideals but pouring out His perfect love into our imperfect hearts, giving us the ability to receive His love by faith in the Lord Jesus. Nothing Data’s love interest could do would elicit emotion from Data, but God rejoices over us with singing! God gives, loves, gets angry, and more—yet He rules over His beloved with grace and mercy. Therefore, we should believe and obey His Word as the fullest revelation of God to humanity. Jesus Himself says that all the Scriptures speak of Him—the Old Testament law, the prophetic books, the psalms—and all that Scripture says about Him must be fulfilled (Luke 24:27, 44), including His suffering, death, and resurrection.

The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible describes *biblical authority* as the idea that the Bible is the Word of God and as such should be believed and obeyed. Our society resists and challenges the idea of authority. Many people’s deep reaction is that “no one is the boss of me.” Baker goes on to say that since the concept of authority is generally challenged in our society, it leaves us with the question, “Who has the power and right to require submission?”³ God alone has this right. Too of-

ten in Christian circles, we have abandoned God's authority and the authority of His Word. Instead, we've delegated it to trusted pastors, theologians, and teachers, who themselves have abandoned God's authority and have set themselves up as the sole trusted ruler over God's people, misleading and deceiving many to such an extent that Christians lose the ability to discern and hear the voice of God. As a result, some believers can only hear the narrative handed down by human leaders rather than by God through His Word. Lord, help us! This must stop. God has given us His Word as our authority, so we have the responsibility to believe, obey, and submit ourselves, in the words of the old saints, to "what saith the Lord." The focus of this book is to help us understand the Bible literarily and while this literary understanding will serve as a guardrail to help us yield to the authority of God's Word, we must also take time to understand the Bible in its cultural and historical contexts as well. A literary approach helps with this because the literary features of the text will help us make appropriate historical and cultural connections. No one likes to be told what to do. At one point in Data's new relationship, he tests out human emotion. His girlfriend challenges his behavior and says he's behaving foolishly. He taps into his "anger," points at her, and says "You don't tell me how to behave. You're not my mother!" When someone tells us to do something we don't want to do, or to behave in ways that rub against our natural tendencies, or when instructions are unclear or undesirable, or when we feel we're already doing everything right yet we're still challenged to change, we can often respond like Data, pointing our finger defiantly at God. We can erroneously assume there must be something wrong with God rather than accept His authority and submit to it.

How do we know the Bible is our authority? God tells us so. “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16). It’s through the Scriptures that we learn about Christ (John 5:39–48). The Scriptures bear witness about Christ, and it is through Christ that we have eternal life. In Christ, we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28). The Bible is our authority because it was breathed out by the God who made us in His image to reflect His glory in the earth.

At a recent conference for teen girls, I asked a young teen what she was learning at the conference. She told me she was learning about authority. She said, “I always thought authority was mean, so I thought God was mean. I learned that God’s authority is based on love. He’s not barking orders at me to obey because He is mean. He’s in the tunnel with me, guiding me in love.” Most people don’t connect authority and love as well as this teen girl. They see authority as punitive. Jonathan Leeman, in his book *The Rule of Love*, says, “God is love, but God is also King. His authority is a gift; and his gift of authority to people, when used for its creational or redemptive purposes, is an action of love. . . . Good authority strengthens and grows. It nourishes and draws out.”⁴

God’s authority given to us in the Word does provide rules and guidelines for us. These rules are not rigid and intended to punish; rather, they are guides that tell us all we need to know, believe, and observe for salvation. On just about any holiday, weekend, or Friday night entertainment, families and friends gather to play games. It’s customary when playing any game that you play by “house rules.” There are general rules that everyone agrees are standard to the game, but in a particular household some aspects of the rules can be added or changed according to the rules of that house. So, in the card

game of Spades, the highest cards in the deck, called trump cards, are all the spades and sometimes the Jokers. However, in my house, the two of diamonds is also a trump card, and the two of diamonds and the two of spades become the third and fourth highest cards in the game, after the Jokers. Of course, if you are not familiar with this set of house rules, playing will take some adjustment. Players might decide to revert back to the general rules in future games. This is not how rules work with God. There are no “house rules” subject to each person’s discretion to adjust as they see fit. No, all of God’s words are to be obeyed by all of God’s people. He is the authority. He is the “house.” God’s rules guide us in knowing Him personally, understanding forgiveness of sin and the gift of salvation, living godly lives, and obeying Him. The unfolding of God’s Word provides us with light and understanding (Psalm 119:130). This understanding comes to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot understand spiritual realities apart from the help of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). God Himself must reveal to us His Word in words and ways we can understand (Romans 1:19). Speaking the truth of His Word to us in story and letter and proverb and prophecy is one way the Lord helps us to understand supernatural realities and truths that would otherwise be lost on us.

GOD REVEALS

The Bible is for everyone. There are aspects of God’s Word that pertain to every human no matter their relationship to God—for example, that we are made in His image, that we have dignity and worth, that we can see His invisible qualities in His creation. This is called *general revelation*. But there are

aspects of God's character and work in the world and in our hearts that can only be understood by those who have repented and believed in Christ. This is called *special revelation*.

God reveals Himself to us in who He says He is, what He is like, and what He does. What makes God *God*? He is the Creator of all, perfect, infinite, eternal, all-knowing, all-wise, unchanging. "He is the living God, enduring forever. . . . He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth" (Daniel 6:26–27). In Deuteronomy 4:35, Moses declares, "The LORD is God; there is no other besides him." He reminds Israel that God revealed Himself to them in miraculous ways—they heard His voice, they saw His fire guiding them by night and His cloud directing them by day. He delivered them from their enemies and brought them to the land of their inheritance. He did all this so they would know that God is God—ruler, creator, sustainer, provider, deliverer. Therefore, their right response should be to love, obey, and trust Him.

God reveals Himself to us through nature. He made the sunshine and rain to fall on sinners and saints alike (Matthew 5:45). Even the animals and shrubs understand they were created by the hand of God (Job 12:7–10). We also know something of God through lives, human experience as His image bearers (Genesis 1:26–27). We are born, we breathe, we see and touch and move and smell and taste, not by anything we have done, not by force of will or skill, but because God has given us these capacities. We know from Psalm 19:1 that the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim His handiwork. But we, too, as created beings, declare the existence of God, the power of God, the divine nature of God (Romans 1:19–20). Because God has clearly communicated

these aspects of His character to us, we have no excuse for not believing the truth about who He is. The Scriptures go on to say that though God clearly reveals Himself to us, we neither honor Him as God nor do we thank Him. Instead we suppress the truth and give honor not to God but to other created things. It's like having a fancy, comfy recliner in your home, but you go out to a junkyard and replace the recliner with a rickety, wooden, functioning electric chair. No one would knowingly make such a trade, but that's what happens spiritually when we exchange God's truth for the world's lies. He offers us life, but the world only offers death and destruction. Our belief in the truth should lead to actions that uphold the truth.

Our knowledge of God is restored when the Holy Spirit invades our hearts to give us the ability to respond to the gospel message in saving faith. Were it not for the Holy Spirit, wooing us and softening our hearts and opening our eyes, we would not be able to discern spiritual truth. The Scriptures teach us that “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). The only way we can have the mind of Christ that allows us to have a true knowledge of God—rooted in the person and work of Christ—is for God by His Spirit to move us to that understanding.

It is through Jesus that God most clearly shows us what He is like and what He requires of us. Each Gospel writer introduced Jesus in a unique way, similar but distinct. In Matthew 1:1, we read that Jesus is “the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Mark 1:1 calls him “the Son of God.” Luke stated that his gospel is a story of the things they had witnessed

concerning Jesus (Luke 1:1). When the angel Gabriel visited Mary to tell her that she would have a son and name him Jesus, he said Jesus “will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32) and that He would rule over a kingdom that will have no end (Luke 1:33). Luke echoed Mark’s description of Jesus as the Son of God (Luke 1:35). The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the Word (1:1), the true light (1:5–8), the Word who became flesh (1:14), and the One who makes Him known to us (1:18).

All of Scripture, what was written and the ways it was written, seeks to make Jesus known to us. The Scriptures teach us that, as the Word made flesh, Jesus was fully God. His birth was predicted and proclaimed by the angels (Luke 1:31; 2:11). We learn that “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” and that all things were created by Him (Colossians 1:15–16). The whole fullness of God is in Jesus (Colossians 2:9), and Jesus refers to Himself as the I AM who existed before Abraham (John 8:57–59). Both Jesus and God are referred to as Alpha and Omega, indicating they are indeed the same person (Revelation 1:8; 22:13). To avoid the confusion of those who might think there might be two gods, Jesus clearly states that He and the Father are one (John 10:30).

While Jesus is fully God, He is also fully man. He was born (Matthew 1:18, 25). He grew (Luke 2:40, 52). He had emotions (John 11:35; 12:27). He ate and slept and moved in the world as all human people do. He died. But what makes Jesus unique among humanity is that He never sinned. He lived a perfect life of obedience to God and was therefore able to be the perfect, blameless, unblemished sacrifice God required as a substitute for the sins of humanity. In His body,

He took upon Himself the sins of all humanity of all time so that if any repent of their sins and trust in Him, they will have eternal life.

At the end of the first book in the Eragon series, Eragon defeated a vicious adversary who had wreaked havoc on the world of Alagaesia. Weakened by the battle, Eragon received the assurance he needed to continue his journey to fully and finally free Alagaesia from every evil foe. A stranger appeared in his consciousness to guide him to his next set of battles. This helper told him, “You are greater than you know, Eragon. Think of what you have done and rejoice, for you have rid the land of a great evil. You have wrought a deed no one else could. Many are in your debt.”⁵

By analogy, the epic story that the Bible is telling—from Genesis to Revelation—is the story of how God redeems the people He created by sending Jesus to be the Savior of the world. He did what no other human could do. He defeated our greatest foe, Satan, and guaranteed our victory over sin and death through His death and resurrection. We enter this epic by opening our Bibles, longing to listen to God speak to us through His Word, joyfully submitting ourselves to His rule, and fully trusting in God’s revelation of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.