
Chapter 1

Who is Jesus?

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

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

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depicted on the screen or the stage. Perhaps we find such pleasure in these tales because our lives are playing out in one.

Hold that thought...

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

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

The drama unfolds as a love story, with the surprising and good news that God gets glory through His gracious and steadfast pursuit of a most unlikely object of His affection – the often unlovely and consistently rebellious people He created. The fullness of God's character comes into view at the entrance of His Son, whom Scripture describes as the image of the invisible Father (Col. 1:15; John 1:18). The Son turns out to be the main character of the story as He gives Himself sacrificially for His beloved bride.

While the Scriptures are made up of hundreds of stories that are often told on their own, they are merely parts of this grander tale. They are like scenes of a play – occasionally humorous, sometimes tragic, and often so full of darkness and despair we see only glimpses of hope that things won't always be as they appear. The real value

in knowing the storyline of the Bible though is found in what it teaches us about the main characters.

Act I: A Redeemer Promised

The story opens at the very good beginning with God as creator of all things – the day and night; the sun, moon, and stars; and the animals on land, sea, and air. The first week spectacularly climaxed with the creation of the first people being made ‘in the image of God’ (Gen. 1:27). God generously and graciously placed Adam and Eve in a perfect garden where He communed directly with them, and they had unfiltered access to Him. He gave them to each other for their companionship, enjoyment, and so they could multiply and fill the earth with offspring. He provided them an abundance of good food to eat and easy access to it all. He gave them good work to do and a beautiful and luxurious office space to do it in. He loved His people, and out of this lavish love and generosity He gave them the unique privilege and unparalleled responsibility of tending to His creation. They alone had the opportunity to image their Maker in the way they cared for God’s creation on His behalf. Talk about living your best life!

But instead of living in obedience to this good God and under His obviously good authority and blessing, Adam and Eve turned against Him. They should have contentedly ruled over creation, but instead they listened to the crafty lies of the serpent, letting God’s enemy rule over them. In eating the forbidden fruit, they forfeited all the rights and privileges of the good life they had in Eden and formed a massive chasm between themselves and their God. Oh, and important to the story is that they did so on behalf of all of us. They were representatives of Humanity – for everyone in the entire world for all time.

FIRST PROMISED IN THE GARDEN

The world was irrevocably altered after this fall of mankind into sin. The very good world of Eden found in Genesis 1-2 suddenly

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became the sin-cursed, thorn-infected world of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve's rebellion against God was far more than a mere mistake; it introduced evil into the perfect world God had created. The serpent had promised the eyes of Adam and Eve would be opened if they rebelled against God, but what they saw was shame. After their transgression, the previously innocent world was filled with guilt as the first couple became aware of their nakedness and covered themselves with fig leaves. Their attempt to cover their own shame left them hiding from their God. Their physical nakedness pointed toward their spiritual helplessness as they stood in obvious need of covering.

The consequences of this first sin were catastrophic. God declared that the fruitfulness He had so generously given to Adam and Eve would now come only with great difficulty. For Eve, being fruitful and multiplying would be marked by great pain from that point forward. For Adam, His previously fruitful bounty would now come through difficult toil, thorns, and thistles (Gen. 3:16-19). As a result of sin, Adam and Eve's lives were marked by pain and distance from their God. If man were ever to know a garden-like state and unity with God again, God Himself would have to bring it about. Remarkably, that is what God promised the man and the woman right after the fall as He moved in a surprisingly gracious way.

Instead of striking them dead immediately for their rebellion, God promised His people that through the pain of childbearing He would provide a Savior for mankind. Judgment was coming, but God would provide a path for salvation through it. God cursed the serpent and told of enmity between him and Eve's offspring, with the promised offspring ultimately prevailing. 'He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel' (Gen. 3:15 NIV). Despite Adam and Eve's act of cosmic treason, God graciously killed an animal and made 'garments of skins and clothed them' (Gen. 3:21). This foreshadowed One who would come to cover His people's spiritual

nakedness – a serpent-crushing Savior who would cover His people not simply with garments of animal skin but robes of righteousness, purchased with blood.

Even though the first people were blessed and declared ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31) by God at creation, just six chapters into the story, we read of mankind’s spiral into wickedness. Adam and Eve’s rebellion toward God had grown into a full-blown mutiny of mankind against the Creator. ‘The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.’ What was God’s response to His creation choosing such evil? ‘The Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart’ (Gen. 6:5-7). God’s wrath against the sinful human race was so great that He destroyed almost every living thing on the earth through a worldwide flood. God spared only the blessed passengers who took refuge in Noah’s ark. This story is not a child’s fable, but rather an early (and graphic) scene that highlights God’s wrath towards those in rebellion against Him. And yet in it, we also see another beautiful picture of God’s grace. Again we see that through judgment, God provided a path of salvation for some. He provided a way for His beloved people (Noah and his family) to come safely through those treacherous flood waters.

But not even catastrophic annihilation of life destroyed the wickedness in men’s hearts. We do not even have to turn a page in the Bible before we see it in Noah himself. Even though he had just been the most favored and blessed man on the planet, Noah promptly came out of the ark – and sinned again. Much like his first parents, Noah took the fruit of the land and turned it against his Creator (Gen. 9:20-21). In the flood, God removed people from the earth because of their sin, but He did not remove sin from the people of the earth.