

# THE HEART OF THE STORY

DISCOVER YOUR LIFE WITHIN THE  
GRAND EPIC OF GOD'S STORY

A COMPANION TO THE STORY



RANDY FRAZEE

Not only have I heard Randy Frazee teach these messages, but I have seen him live them. I am honored to partner with him in ministry, and I have no hesitation to recommend this book to you.

MAX LUCADO, pastor and bestselling author

I'm privileged to call Randy Frazee my friend, and I know one important thing about him: he is a man of the Word. He loves the Bible, and he loves people. What's more, he's uniquely qualified to explain how our Lower Story fits into the Upper Story of God's plans and purposes. This a story you really need to read.

DAVE RAMSEY, bestselling author and  
nationally syndicated radio show host

I love a good story. I love hearing them, reading them, and telling them. There's nothing like a good story to reach a heart, heal a hurt, kindle hope, or even cause a life to change direction. What Randy Frazee has done in *The Heart of the Story* is to masterfully weave together from the pages of Scripture the grand story of God, and he tells us the story in a way that not only gets at God's heart, but gets to our hearts as well. If you want to get drawn into a really compelling story that promises to change your life forever, read *The Heart of the Story*.

MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and  
lead pastor of National Community Church

*The Heart of the Story* lifted my chin, time and time again, reminding me to reckon God's promises with my problems. We so easily default to an earthbound perspective. But God is always writing a bigger story with our lives. Randy Frazee unpacks Scripture with passion, clarity, and conviction. He's one of my favorite guests on the show because he truly believes what he reads in Scripture. May the epic kingdom story come to life as you work your way through the pages of this masterful book.

SUSIE LARSON, talk radio host, national speaker,  
and author of *Your Powerful Prayers*

I love the heart, insight, and teaching of Randy Frazee. I had the privilege of performing a song for *The Story* project—“How Love Wins”—inspired by the message of this book. The song takes the point of view of the thief alongside Jesus at the crucifixion. When Jesus shouted, “It is finished,” the world thought he was admitting *he* was finished. But from the Upper Story perspective, Jesus was declaring that *his work* of redeeming us was finished on the cross, and a new beginning was born. This is just one of the life-transforming nuggets in the pages of *The Heart of the Story*. Read it, and you may just find a new beginning for yourself.

STEVEN CURTIS CHAPMAN, singer/songwriter and  
author of *Cinderella: The Love of a Daddy and His Princess*

The Bible, the whole Bible, is put together and displayed as a single sweeping narrative in this extraordinary work of storytelling. Randy Frazee has invested a lifetime making God’s Word useful, interesting, and accessible. This is his masterpiece!

BOB BUFORD, founder of Leadership Network  
and author of *Halftime* and *Finishing Well*

Our church has grown so much going through *The Story*. I’m excited to take them through *The Heart of the Story* and see the Bible come alive for our people!

MARK HALL, lead singer of Casting Crowns and author of *Thrive*

Randy Frazee is not just a gifted leader and communicator; he is also a man with a unique ability to take the powerful things of God and present them to this generation with clarity and purpose.

LEON FONTAINE, CEO of Miracle Channel, senior pastor of Springs Church (Canada), and television host of *The Spirit Contemporary Life*

*The Heart of the Story* is a brilliant work reminding us that the Bible is a collection of narratives that make up the story of God. Randy Frazee artistically guides us to discover our place in God’s story. If you, like me, have always craved to know your role in the unfolding story of God, you’ll want to read and share this book with others. *The Heart of the Story* is a gift.

DAVE FERGUSON, lead pastor of Community Christian Church, lead visionary of NewThing, and author of *Finding Your Way Back to God*

The Bible is not a series of isolated fairy tales. It's one story, told in hundreds of chapters and in a compelling journey. Randy Frazee invites us—and then he takes us on that journey. And you will want to join him on it!

ED STETZER, Billy Graham Distinguished Chair, Wheaton College

As a songwriter, I've always been passionate about the power of a story. That's one of the reasons I've connected so deeply with Randy Frazee's book *The Heart of the Story*. Finding our story in the midst of the greater story that God is telling truly is the mission we're all on, and this book helps us find the heart of the story along the way.

MATTHEW WEST, award-winning singer/songwriter

If you live in the world of business, you can easily get stuck in the earthbound story of your work. Randy Frazee gently repositions our eyes and priorities toward God's grand narrative, one in which you will see yourself clearly as you live out your calling. As you ponder these stories, you'll feel God's vertical tug on your spreadsheet-driven, people-problem world and discover how to raise the cross at the center of the marketplace. In Randy's words, you'll find your story in God's story.

GREG LEITH, CEO of Convene

We live in the Lower Story. It's hard for us to see around the next bend in the road, let alone a generation or millennia. God sees everything from the Upper Story. He wrote the beginning and is orchestrating how the story ends. *The Heart of the Story* gives a glimpse into God's Upper Story and provides a road map for aligning our story to his story. Randy Frazee's teaching has deeply influenced my personal life, teaching, and the congregation I lead. It will do the same for you!

DR. BENJI W. KELLEY, founding pastor of  
NewHope Church, Durham, North Carolina

ALSO BY RANDY FRAZEE

*The Christian Life Profile Assessment*

*The Connecting Church 2.0*

*The Heart of the Story*

*Making Room for Life*

*Real Simplicity* (expanded edition of *Making*

*Room for Life*; with Rozanne Frazee)

*Renovation of the Heart: Student Edition* (with Dallas Willard)

*Think, Act, Be Like Jesus*

# THE HEART OF THE STORY

DISCOVER YOUR LIFE WITHIN THE  
GRAND EPIC OF GOD'S STORY

REVISED AND EXPANDED

RANDY FRAZEE

 ZONDERVAN®



ZONDERVAN

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*To Mike Reilly—*

*you have aligned your life to God's Upper Story,  
and I am one of many who have received the blessing.*

*May God continue to blow wind in your sails  
as you press forward in your adventure in serving others.*





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# FOREWORD

## BY MAX LUCADO

Above and around us, God directs a grander saga, written by his hand, orchestrated by his will, unveiled according to his calendar. His “Upper Story” details his plan of redemption. He is creating an eternal people for an eternal place.

Without the lens of the Upper Story, the events of the “Lower Story” perplex and confuse us. They create moments of confusion in which we feel too old, too small, unqualified, or outnumbered. But in the context of his Upper Story, our Lower Story moments make sense.

Look at young Joseph in the Egyptian prison. A bright, talented youth wasting away behind bars. Imprisonment makes no sense—from the Lower Story angle. But from the Upper Story, we see something else. We see God protecting the youth in prison so he can use him in the palace. Joseph is sentenced today so he can serve God tomorrow and save the children of Israel from famine and extinction.

Or take the challenge of another Joseph. This one enters the story two thousand years later as a young carpenter in Nazareth. A seamy scandal has rocked his world. Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant. Joseph is not the father. Of

## *The Heart of the Story*

this, he is sure. Of anything else, he is not. His life has taken a random turn toward chaos. But we know better, don't we? We know better because we've read the story from the Upper Level. The baby in Bethlehem's straw has convinced us that God was up to something higher, grander, and greater. Joseph's scandal was actually God's solution.

The Bible reads like this. One "aha story" after another. Prisons are actually provisions. Scandals are actually solutions. Tragedy at eye level is actually triumph at God's level.

Randy Frazee masterfully takes us to the Upper Story. I've never met anyone who better understands the big story of the Bible. I have heard Randy teach these messages at our church in San Antonio, Texas. These truths changed the perspective of our congregation, and they will do the same for you.

Not only have I heard Randy teach these messages, but I've also seen him live them. He skillfully leads our congregation and graciously guides his family. Randy and his wife, Rozanne, have invested three decades of service into the kingdom of God. They have made a difference.

I am honored to partner with him in ministry, and I have no hesitation to recommend this book to you. Let the prayer of the psalmist be yours: "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:2). You and I need to see life from God's view, from his Upper Story. May he take us there. And may he use this book to do it.

# PREFACE

*I* grew up in an unchurched home—which simply means that my family didn't go to church. My parents weren't against Jesus; he just didn't make the short list of priorities in their lives. But I did have two spiritual deposits in my life. The first came in the form of a ceramic prayer plaque that hung over my bed. I said this prayer every night before I went to sleep. Maybe you know it—

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Let me ask you, what kind of a sick person writes a prayer like that for children? Each night as I went to bed, it wasn't sweet dreams of sugar plums dancing in my head. No, I thought, *This just might be it for me. And what are the chances the Lord will take my soul? My parents don't even take me to church!*

The second spiritual deposit was the Bible my grandmother gave me when I was a small child. I still have it to this day. It was a black leather King James Version of the Bible that sat on our family bookshelf in the hallway between our bedrooms. I remember on several occasions unzipping the Bible, lying on the floor, tucking the palms of my hands under my chin, and beginning to read with a simple faith that

## *The Heart of the Story*

there was something in it I desperately needed to know. After fifteen minutes of giving it my full attention, I would close it, zip it up, and place it back on the shelf. I read it, but I didn't get it. I wanted to, but it just wasn't within my reach.

Maybe you feel the same way. You know the Bible is important. Like most people, "read through the Bible" is on your bucket list—things you want to accomplish before you "kick the bucket." It's right up there with climbing Mount Everest and jumping out of an airplane. For some, these two goals may feel more achievable than getting through the Bible. You are not alone. Forty-one percent of people who say they own at least four Bibles confess to never reading it.

That's why I'm so excited that you have picked up this book. Let me tell you why by giving you the backstory of how this book came about.

At the age of fourteen, my younger sister and I were invited by a neighbor two doors down to their church's vacation Bible school. Three days into hearing the basic message of the gospel—the good news of what Jesus did for me—I became a Christian and began my journey into discovering God's Word. At the age of fifteen, at a summer camp in New York, I dedicated my life to become a pastor. Fast-forward to age twenty-eight. After receiving degrees in theology and biblical studies, I began pastoring my first church. It didn't take long to recognize that people were struggling with the Bible as much as I did as a young boy. The search was on for solutions, but none seemed to help in a major way for the majority of people.

Now fast-forward all the way to 2005. At this point, I had been a pastor for a little more than fifteen years. I received a call from Doug Lockhart, a vice president of marketing for Zondervan. He wanted to stop by my office in Fort Worth, Texas, to show me three new Bible products. Sitting in my small conference room, Doug proceeded to show me those three products, but the one that stood out to me was called *The Story*.

*The Story* is an abridged chronology of the Bible. It doesn't have every word of the Bible in it, but it does put the story of the Bible into chronological order (which, by the way, is not how the sixty-six books of our printed Bibles are normally organized). All the chapter and verse references in *The Story* are omitted so that it reads more like a novel.

I thought, *This is it! This is a tool I can use to help the people of my church not only get through the story of the Bible but also really see for themselves, many for the*

## Preface

*first time, the extent to which God has gone to get us back.* The gospel didn't begin in Matthew, but in the book of Genesis. My vision was to have the whole church, ages 2 through 102, experience *The Story* together for thirty-one weeks—matching the numbers of chapters in the book. Imagine everyone on the same journey to understand the overarching story of the Bible—adults, young people, and children. Let's do this together!

The vision became a reality three years later. I accepted the position of senior minister of Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas, where author Max Lucado had served in that role for twenty years. Gratefully, he stayed on with me as a teaching pastor. I remember the first time I shared the vision with Max. We were on the golf course. As he began mulling the idea over, the wheels of his creative mind started to spin and the wheels of his golf game fell off. At the end of the round, neither of us played an epic round of golf, but we did walk off the course with a vision. For my first year as senior minister of Oak Hills Church, we would anchor the people in a rich experience in God's Word. We would take the entire church on a journey through *The Story*, chapter by chapter for thirty-one weeks.

Max and I took the vision back to Zondervan to see if they might be interested in publishing all the companion tools we would need for students and children. As if it were a part of God's plan all along, they enthusiastically said yes, and off we went. At the end of the thirty-one weeks, we were amazed at the level of excitement. For the first time, many folks finally saw for themselves the one grand story of God. While we didn't go through this experience to grow the church numerically, we saw a net increase in attendees of 23 percent! This tells me that people are hungry for God's Word and his story like never before.

It wasn't until 2011 that these materials were available to other churches. We were deeply curious how other churches would respond. Well, it has been five years since the release of *The Story*. To date, more than seven thousand churches have experienced it for themselves, with nearly six and a half million lives touched. And there is no sign that things are slowing down yet. Yay, God!

One of the books I had the privilege to write for this unique encounter is the one you hold in your hands—*The Heart of the Story*. This book mirrors the thirty-one chapters of *The Story*. While *The Story* is 99 percent Scripture, *The Heart of the Story* is my chance to speak into what I have learned about each chapter and its



## *The Heart of the Story*

importance in our lives. In these pages, I strive to lay out a powerful observation about the Bible you may have never seen. There are two stories being written at the same time throughout the pages of the Bible—the Upper Story and the Lower Story. The Lower Story is how the story unfolds from the perspective of humanity. The Upper Story is how the story is unfolding from God’s perspective. The Bible is filled with hundreds and hundreds of Lower Stories, but it contains just one Upper Story. When you rise above and gaze at all these individual stories, you will see how God used each and every one of them to tell his grand love story of redemption. *The Heart of the Story* is designed to help you see this Upper Story in vivid color.

What God did then he is still doing now. His story isn’t finished yet. Your life is unfolding even as you read these words. You see the events of your life—passing the mashed potatoes, picking up the kids, going to work, and so forth—some days better than others, some days worse—from your perspective. But know this: God is writing a story, and you are a character within it. He wants you to see your story from his perspective. He wants you to align your story to his story. The same God who was at work in the pages of the Bible is at work in your life. Seriously!

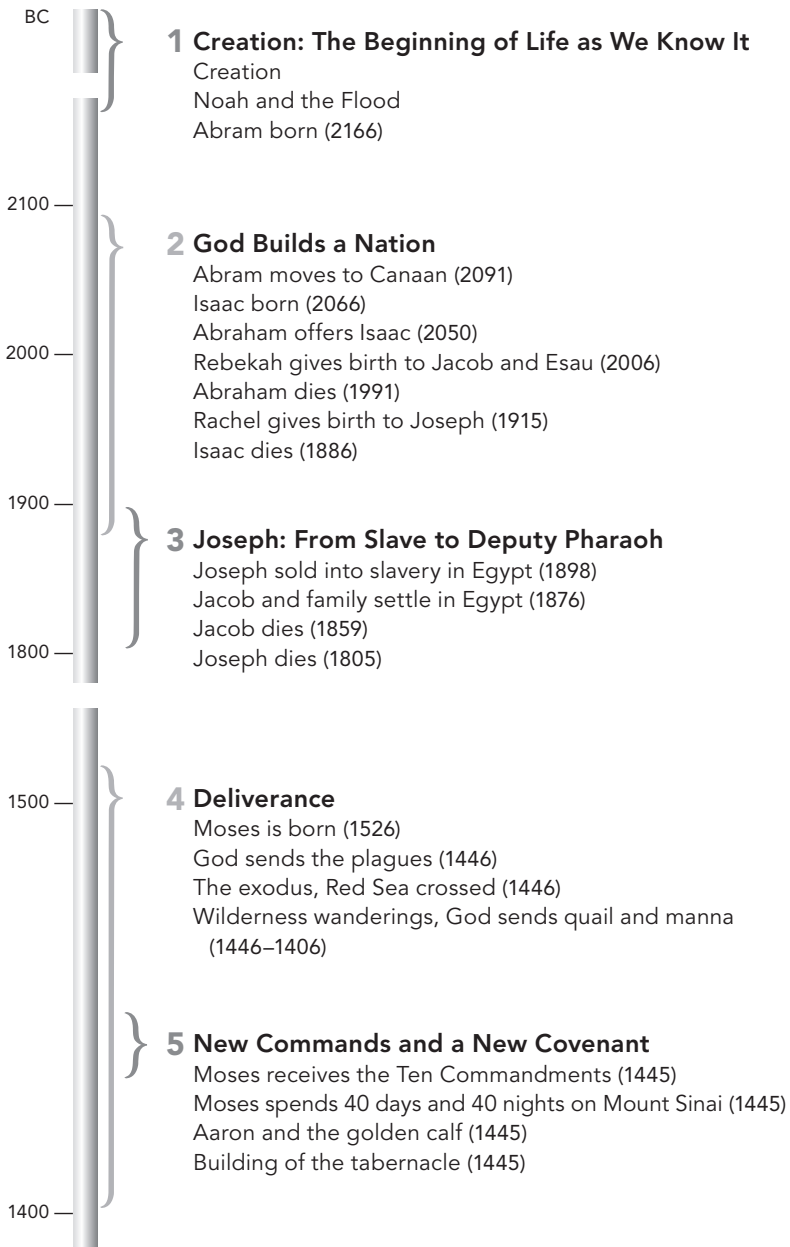
Looking back on my life from the time I was a little boy until today, I can see the story God has been writing with my life. Things are following the same pattern of most of the characters of the Bible. God takes the least likely candidate and uses them to accomplish his grand purposes. We see this over and over and over again. Why does he do this? So that when something important happens, that person (and everyone else, for that matter) will have to point to a higher power—to God—for an explanation. The goal of our life is to point people to God.

I started the journey in an unchurched home with a Bible I could not understand and a prayer plaque that frightened me almost to death. Now, God has used me in a small way to help others understand the Bible. Isn’t that just like God? It is my prayer that the next time you pull your Bible off the shelf, lie on the floor, tuck the palms of your hands under your chin, and begin to read it, you will get it.

It is just like God to use a person like me all these years later to help others understand the grand story of the Bible.

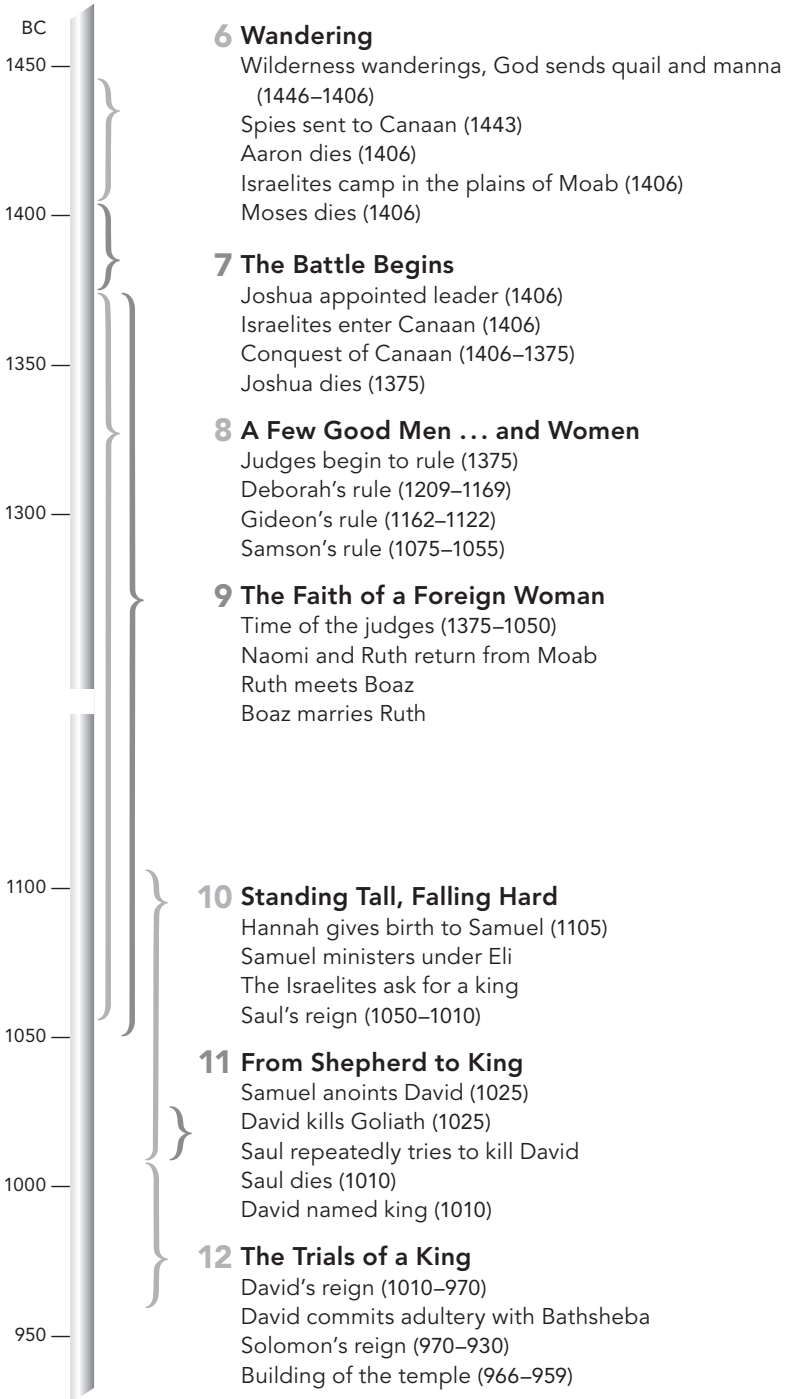
*Randy Frazee, San Antonio, Texas*  
July 2016

# TIMELINE OF THE STORY

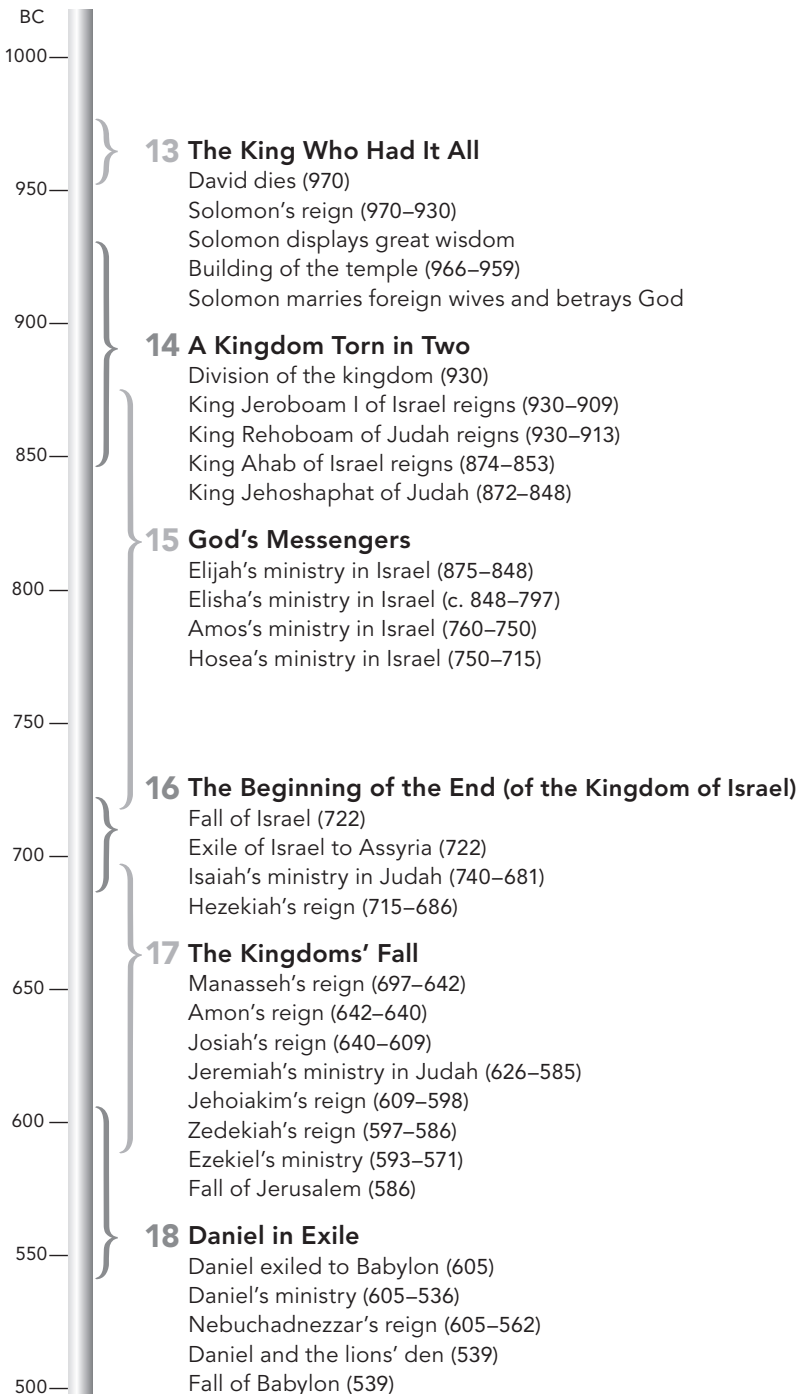


*\*Dates are approximate and dependent on the interpretative theories of various scholars.*

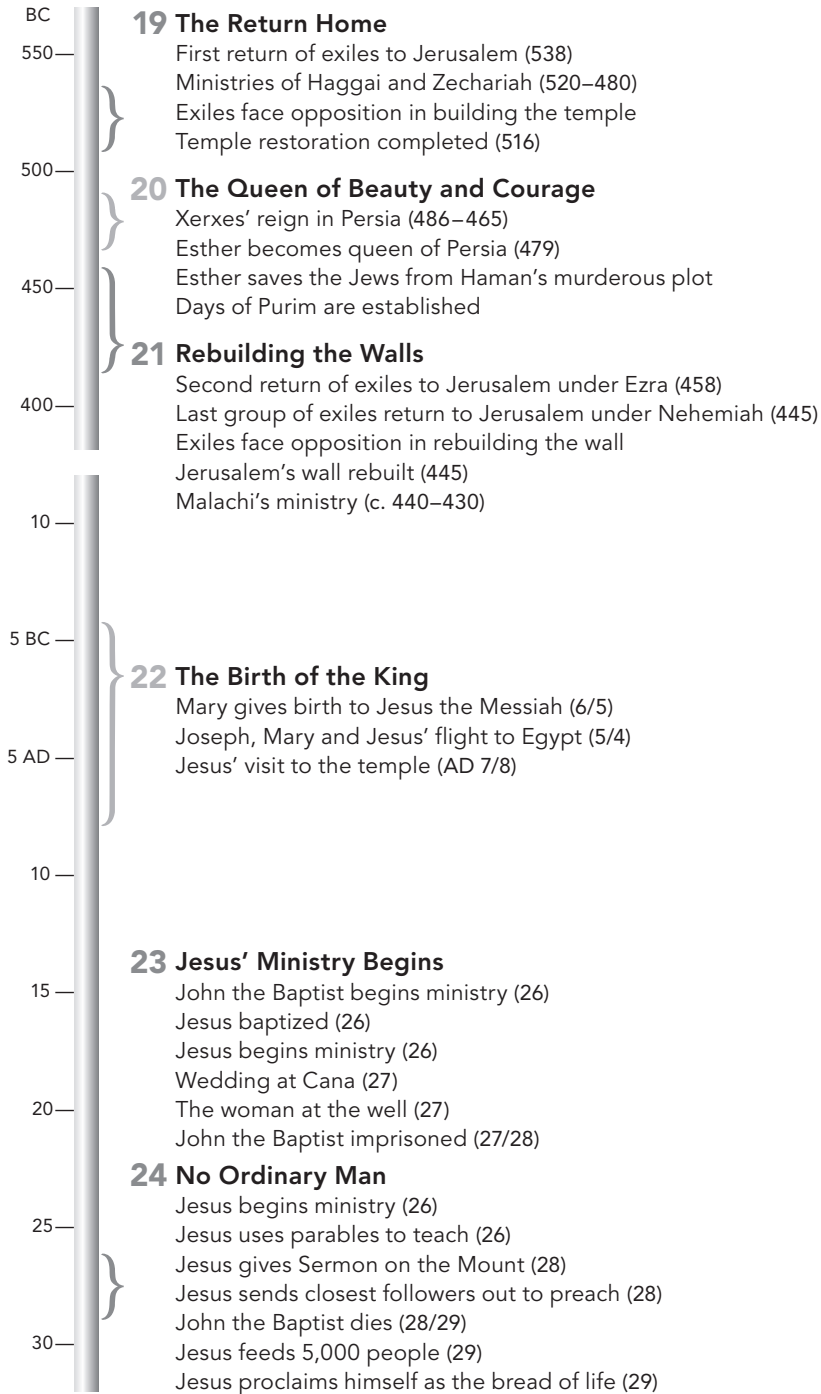
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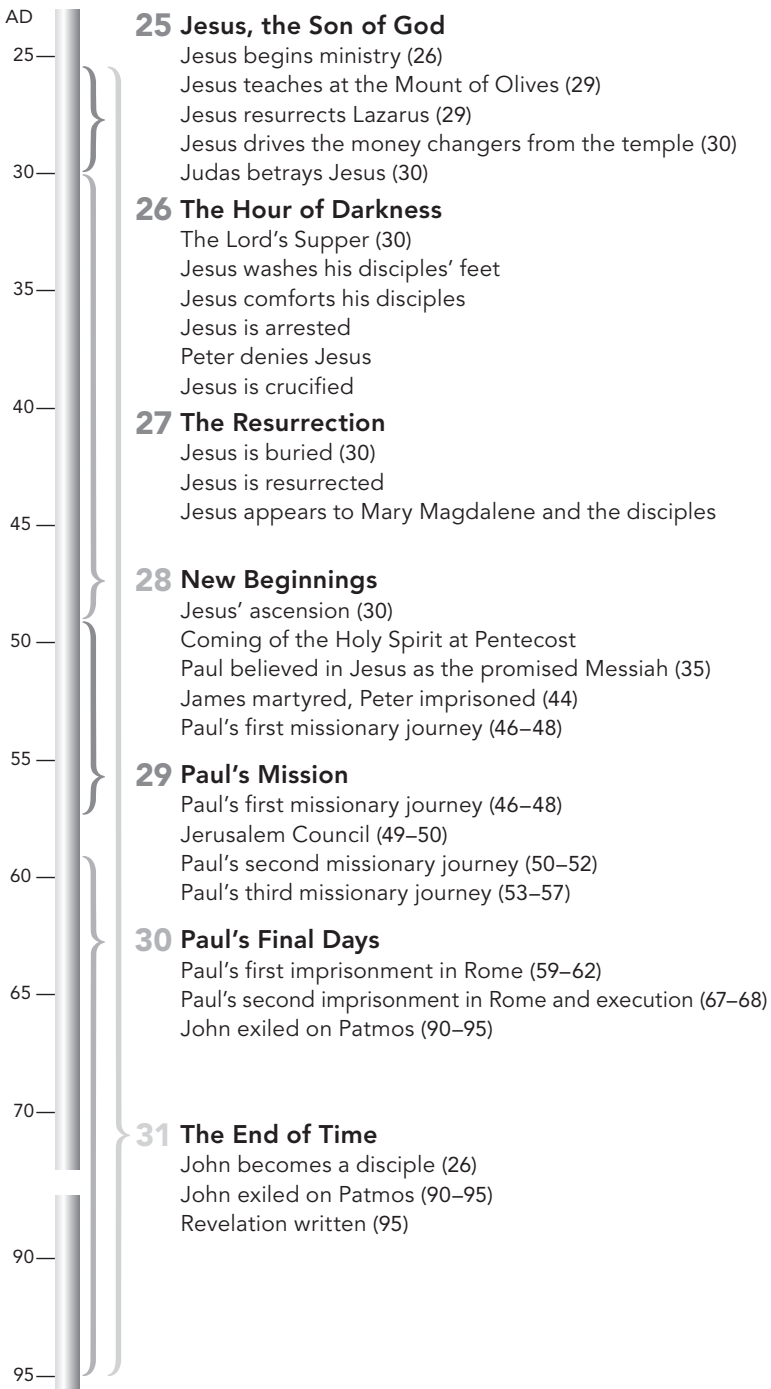
## Timeline of The Story



*The Heart of the Story*



## *Timeline of The Story*





## *Introduction*

# THE ART GALLERY AND THE MURAL

*For we are God's masterpiece. He has created  
us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the  
good things he planned for us long ago.*

EPHESIANS 2:10 NLT

*W*ave you ever struggled to understand how the various stories in the Bible connect to one another? Or wondered how those stories relate to the story of your life today? What if the testimonies in the Bible, the lives of everyone who ever lived, and your own “story still in progress” are all connected—all part of one big divine epic?

Two of the most famous works of art in the world help us understand how the long, sweeping story of the Bible—seemingly a narrative only about God and ancient people with strange names—connects with *your* story. To view the first painting, you must travel to Paris, enter the renowned Louvre Museum, and walk past painting after remarkable painting by some of the greatest artists who have ever lived: Rembrandt, van Gogh, Monet, and, of course, da Vinci.

You climb stairs and move from one cavernous room to another until you



finally spot it: *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci—the most famous painting in the world, and the most valuable, reportedly worth \$700 million. The size of the painting surprises you. Based on legend and popularity, you may have pictured it to stand two stories high, yet the dimensions are a mere 30 inches tall by 21 inches wide—about the size of a built-in microwave oven in your kitchen.

To the untrained eye, the painting appears somewhat ordinary at first. But as you gaze at the subdued colors and subtle shadows, the details, the translucency of the woman's skin and moody atmosphere of the background, it grows on you. For some reason, you are drawn to her gaze, the hint of a smile gleaming there, and you may even agree with those who say that her eyes follow you as you move.

The longer you look, the more you want to know about the woman staring back at you, so you lean closer to the guide who is explaining the painting to a group of English-speaking tourists. Ms. Lisa, you discover, was born on June 15, 1479, during the Italian Renaissance. Her husband was a wealthy Florentine silk merchant who supposedly commissioned this painting for their new home to celebrate the birth of their second son, Andrea.

Good to know, but surely there must be more to her story, you think to yourself. What was happening in her life at the time she posed for this picture? What was that enigmatic smile on her face all about? Was she happy or even amused? Or was she covering up a deep sadness?

After several minutes in front of this famous masterpiece, you stroll through the museum, stopping every now and then to study other paintings that catch your eye: *Supper at Emmaus* by Rembrandt; *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix; *The Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist* by Raphael. Each one is completely different, having its own unique tale utterly unrelated to the *Mona Lisa* story. By the time you leave the museum, you will have stood in front of dozens of exquisite paintings, each with a different and distinct story behind its creation.

To view the other famous work of art, you have to catch a flight to Rome, grab a taxi, and use your best Italian to ask the driver to take you to the Vatican. Upon arriving, you walk across a magnificent plaza and enter the Sistine Chapel and look up to see the breathtaking work of Michelangelo. You are amazed

## *The Art Gallery and the Mural*

to realize that Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci painted their respective masterpieces during the same decade. Yet, while da Vinci isolated one person on a single canvas, Michelangelo captured the full sweep of history.

Perhaps the most famous scene from his dramatic mural shows the strong arm of God reaching out to touch the limp hand of Adam. It has been reproduced on countless posters, prints, and postcards. Now you are standing just below the original!

As you shift your gaze to take in the enormity of this stunning mural, you are mesmerized by the scope of it all. With your neck tilted so far back that it's almost painful, you recognize many of the three hundred characters painted on the ceiling of this room: Adam, Eve, Noah, Jacob, David, and many more. While each section of this massive mural depicts an individual story, they are all connected to tell a grand epic. At the highest point of the ceiling, nine scenes out of the book of Genesis unfold, beginning with God's dividing the light from the darkness and continuing on to the disgrace of Noah. Just beneath these scenes are paintings of the twelve prophets who foretold the birth of the Messiah.

Moving down the walls, crescent-shaped areas surround the chapel that depict the ancestors of Jesus, such as Boaz, Jesse, David, and Jesus' earthly father, Joseph. The entire scheme is completed in the four corners of the room with other dramatic biblical stories, such as the heroic slaying of Goliath by young David.

Each scene, each painting, tells its own singular story, stories you may have heard from childhood. Yet the artist united them to display one magnificent work of art: humanity's need for salvation as offered by God through Jesus.

The Louvre and the Sistine Chapel—two different venues for creative expression. Both display astounding art. The Louvre tells thousands of unrelated, separate stories. The Sistine Chapel, on the other hand, tells only one. On the surface, you and I—along with billions of other humans—are individual paintings hanging on the wall of some cosmic gallery, distinct and unrelated to each other. But if you look closer, you will see that your story is intricately woven into the same seamless narrative depicted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: God's story as recorded in the Bible. One story as seen through many lives.

## *The Heart of the Story*

God wants us to read the Bible as we would view a mural. The individual stories on its pages are connected, all entwining to communicate one overarching epic. Woven tighter than reeds in a waterproof basket, together they intersect within God's one grand story. The purpose of this book is to ponder his divine design and discover our role in it. To stand beneath an all-encompassing Sistine ceiling and see what the entire narrative from beginning to end says about us and to us as individuals.

To better understand this story, we will need to view it with a dual lens. Just as if we were wearing bifocals, through the lower lens we will gaze at individual stories from the Bible in chronological order. Think of these individual pieces as our Lower Story.

The Lower Story reveals the here and now of daily life, the experiences and circumstances we see here on earth. Goals and fears, responsibilities and reactions. In the Lower Story, we make money, pay bills, get sick, get tired, deal with breakups, and work through conflicts. These are the story elements we care about, and as people of faith, we trust God to meet our needs in this Lower Story. And he does! God meets us in each of our Lower Stories and helps us by offering us wisdom and guidance on getting through life with dignity and purpose. He intervenes and applies healing salve to our physical and emotional wounds. Like a tenderhearted Father, God loves to lavish us with his care, stretching out his arms to comfort us when we are in distress and encourage us when we are down.

But he has a higher agenda than our survival and comfort. When we rise above the here and now, look beyond the daily grind, and view each of these stories in the Bible from God's perspective, we see something much bigger. When we look up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it gives us hints that the Bible isn't filled with a thousand individual stories of God's intervention just to get people through rough times, but rather one grand story of something larger, something eternal.

This is the Upper Story. As we view the Bible through this lens, we see that God has been up to something amazing from the very beginning. He has a vision, a big idea, and it is all good news for us. When we look at the Upper Story of God—his magnificent mural—we discover where we fit in, because

this story was created to deliver one singular message: “If you want to live life to the fullest and enjoy it forever, then become part of my masterpiece.”

Jesus modeled this message when he said, “If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.”<sup>1</sup> In another story from the Bible, the close followers of Jesus asked him how to pray. He answered that our prayers should begin like this:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was telling them—and us—that God’s will, his grand plan for the universe, comes first. Always. The priority of our prayer should be acknowledging that God’s will—his master plot, as it were—succeeds above everything else. We should long for God’s Upper Story to unfold because what God wants for us will always be the best. Everything he does is for our own good. Therefore, as the grand mural is still being painted on the ceiling of the universe, we long for it to be finished.

Jesus then adds these words for us to whisper to God when we pray:

Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.<sup>3</sup>

This is Lower Story stuff. We need to eat. Pay the bills. Avoid the little voice that says, “Go ahead; do what feels good. No one will ever know.” These are the groanings of daily life, the raw clay God uses to shape us as vessels on his potter’s wheel. So we cry out to God to meet us in our Lower Story, and he

does. Not always according to our liking, but he is intimately involved and cares deeply about the details of our daily lives. He empowers us to live the Lower Story from an Upper Story perspective. Everything that happens to us in the Lower Story, whether good or bad, will work out for our good if we align our lives to his superior calling.

Jesus not only taught this; he lived it. In Gethsemane, the night before he was to be brutally tortured and crucified, he prayed to his Father, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”<sup>4</sup>






Jesus is fully God, but also fully human. In his divine nature, Jesus knew the weight of taking the sins of the world on himself and having his Father turn away from saving him. In his human nature, Jesus knew how painful and humiliating the torture would be. In Jesus’ Lower Story, he asked if there was any way that he could be released from the horrific experience of death on the cross. This was his cry from below. But he didn’t stop his prayer there. He went on to conclude, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus knew the painless path might not be his Father’s route, so he aligned his life with this Upper Story plan. If this was the only way for God’s grand story to unfold, then Jesus was willing to go through with it. The cross held the only way, and Jesus accepted the journey to the cross and died a humiliating death. Jesus could accept the painful plot twist of the Lower Story because he knew the beautiful theme of redemption in the scope of the Upper Story.

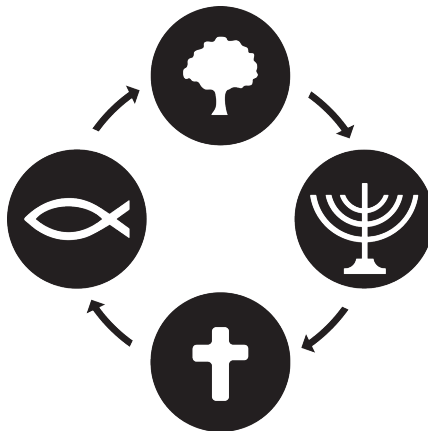
As a pastor, I have the privilege and responsibility to help people understand the Bible. Over the years, it has become clear that the majority of people—even people who have attended church all their lives—view the Bible as an ancient book about what God did in the lives of people “back in Bible days.” This may well explain why so many people who carry their Bibles to church seldom read them, or if they do, they come away a little confused: “What does Abimelech have to do with me?” One of my greatest joys, however, is to see that “aha!” moment when they learn that God’s Upper Story in the Bible connects with their own Lower Story of going to work, caring for their families, and trying to live decent, honorable lives.

As you read through the pages of this book, you are going to encounter five movements within God’s story:

*The Art Gallery and the Mural*

-  The Story of the Garden . . . . . Genesis 1–11
-  The Story of Israel. . . . . Genesis 12–Malachi
-  The Story of Jesus . . . . . Matthew–John
-  The Story of the Church . . . . . Acts–Jude
-  The Story of a New Garden . . . . . Revelation

Let me give you a huge clue about God’s story. It does not unfold as the kind of linear story line we are accustomed to, where things keep moving forward. God’s story is more like a circle:



This amazing adventure ends where it began. Read the first two chapters and the last two chapters of the Bible, and you’ll see they are almost identical. God’s vision in the first garden is ultimately restored, and in the end, a new garden appears. Here is another fascinating discovery: God’s story doesn’t really have a beginning and an end, but a beginning and a new beginning.

God will use three other stories to lead us back to this new beginning—the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, and the story of the church. It is with the story of the church that we find ourselves as characters in this divine epic. Reading

## *The Heart of the Story*

the Bible is not like sitting in a movie passively watching the story line unfold. No, we need to pay careful attention, because we each have a role to play that is very important to the outcome of the story. How exciting is this? God's story is a living, breathing story!

It is my prayer that when you come to the end of this book, not only will you know and better understand God's story; you will have been overwhelmed by his love for you and understand how your portrait fits on the vast canvas that he continues to paint even now.

So, as you turn the page, imagine you have just walked into the Sistine Chapel. You will see many characters in the pages to come, but they all work together to tell the one story of God. Like your own story, each of these stories will be unique, filled with drama, heartache, and joy. Taken individually, not all of them may make sense, but when viewed from God's Upper Story, they fit together perfectly.

## *Movement One*

# THE STORY OF THE GARDEN

*Genesis 1–11*



*I*n the Upper Story, God creates the world of the Lower Story. His vision is to come down and be with us in a beautiful garden. The first two people reject God's vision and are escorted from paradise. Their decision to disobey God introduces sin into the human race and keeps us from community with God. At this moment, God gives a promise and launches a plan to get us back. The rest of the Bible is God's story of how he kept that promise and made it possible for us to enter a loving relationship with him.





*Chapter*  
*1*

CREATION:  
THE BEGINNING OF  
LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

GENESIS 1:1



## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE UPPER STORY

The creator God reveals his grand purposes in writing this story: he wants to do life with us in the garden. Given a choice, the first two people created—Adam and Eve—reject this vision and are escorted out of the garden. Sin, a condition that keeps us from God's presence, is born and is passed down to all the offspring of the first couple. This is evidenced in Cain's act against his brother Abel. Left alone, humanity's collective sin nature escalates as we see the sons of God cohabitating with the daughters of humans. But God wants us back. Plan A is to start over with the best human alive—Noah. This plan fails to resolve the problem. Following the flood, Noah and his family demonstrate that the sin condition stepped off the ark with them when Noah's son disgraces him by looking at his nakedness. Humanity's condition and separation from God remain unchanged. Once again, left alone, sin escalates as evidenced in the building of the Tower of Babel. Time for Plan B.

## ALIGNING OUR STORY TO GOD'S STORY

We are the offspring of Adam and Eve and therefore are conceived with the same sin virus that keeps us from a relationship with God. We demonstrate this reality in the way we treat one another. We hurt, we hurl, we hoard. We are not fit to be in God's presence and share in his perfect community. God wants us back, but the solution will not be found in us. All attempts fail. We must look for and rely on the solution God is going to provide.

Imagine the Creator of the universe “out there” somewhere. Compared to the earth that he created, “out there” is so vast as to be immeasurable. For example, the earth is one of the smallest of the eight planets that make up a huge galaxy. But “out there” is bigger than a galaxy. In 1996, astronomers focused the powerful Hubble Space Telescope on a small and utterly black patch of space right next to the Big Dipper constellation. They left the shutter open for ten days.

What did it reveal? Three thousand *more* galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars, planets, moons, comets, and asteroids. In 2004, scientists did it again. This time they focused the scope on a patch of darkness next to the constellation Orion. They left the lens open for eleven days and discovered ten thousand *more* galaxies in addition to the previous three thousand that had appeared the first time. Scientists call this the “Hubble Ultra Deep Field,” and it represents the farthest humankind has ever seen into the universe. But even more is “out there,” beyond our ability to see.

It turns out there are more than *one hundred billion* galaxies in the universe.

It wasn't always this way. In the beginning God came to a place that was formless, empty, and dark. The Bible tells us “the Spirit of God was hovering” over this place before he went to work creating a space where he could enjoy fellowship with you and me.<sup>1</sup>

Think about this for a moment. If our solar system was reduced in size by a factor of a billion, the earth would be the size of a grape. The sun would be the height of a man. Jupiter would be the size of a grapefruit, and Saturn the size of an orange. Uranus and Neptune would be the size of a lemon. Can you guess how big humans would be? The size of a single atom! We would be completely invisible to the human eye.<sup>2</sup>

Yet to God, we are the crowning masterpiece of his creativity.

The story of the Bible opens with a big bang, but this big bang is not an accident. God is behind or, better, above it all. The Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—challenged each other to the mother of all science fair projects. Creation is the result.

## *The Heart of the Story*

Genesis, the first book in the story of God’s interactions with and plan for mankind, provides us with an amazing starting point. The first two chapters of this book—familiar to most of us—describe how God created the heavens and the earth, and all that is contained within them. But creation is only the subplot of this book.

The *real* point of Genesis is so amazing it’s almost unbelievable: God wants to be with us. The God of the universe has created a place to come down and be with a community of people. He no longer wanted only to enjoy the perfect community he had as the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). The Ultimate Author of this grand story wanted to share it with us.

“In the beginning” God came up with a plan to perfectly connect his Upper Story with our Lower Story. He literally desired to bring heaven down to earth—first to create a paradise and then men and women in his own image, and then to come down and do life with us. Perfectly. Just as he had experienced perfect oneness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The first chapter of Genesis is like a page out of the Trinity Construction work log, except it reads more like poetry. The sequence and pattern are simple, but almost too overwhelming to take in. On days one, two, and three, God paints the places of the earth on the canvas. Then on days four, five, and six, he puts objects in each place to fill this space. Here is how the week breaks down:

Days 1 through 3	Days 4 through 6
1—Light/darkness (verses 3–5)	4—Sun, moon, stars (verses 14–18)
2—Water and sky (verses 6–8)	5—Fish and birds (verses 20–23)
3—Land (verses 9–13)	6—Animals (verses 24–25)

With the end of each day of creation, God steps back, takes a look, and records in his journal, “This is good.” But while the creation of the heavens and the earth and the other one hundred billion galaxies is impressive, it is not the point of the story. Mount Everest. The Grand Canyon. The stark beauty of the Sahara, the cascading elegance of Victoria Falls. Combine these and thousands

of other jewels of his creative powers, and you're not even close to identifying the core passion of God. Those are just the display cases to highlight his *real* work of art.

The pride and joy of God's handiwork, the point of it all, is revealed in Genesis 1:

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.<sup>3</sup>

The perfect and beautiful world God created was incomplete without his crowning achievement—people he could enjoy and love and with whom he could communicate. Adam and Eve, you and me, and everyone in between. He had a passion to expand the wonderful community experienced by the triune God. He longed to create the perfect environment where he could hang out with real people, and we know he was proud of this final creative act, because this time he stepped back and declared, "This is very good."

With this final creative act, God's plan was in place. In his Upper Story, he experienced a perfect community. He could have continued to enjoy this total oneness forever, but he wanted to share it. He desired to bring this community to a place where it could be enjoyed by others. So the Lower Story begins with God's grand idea to set the stage and create men and women in his image and then come down and do life with us.

This is the prologue to the entire history of God and mankind. Everything begins with God. The universe, the galaxies, our little planet, men and women—all were God's idea. His vision was to spend eternity in a perfect community enjoying the fellowship of people he created in his own image. He *chose* to bring you and me into the world for his pleasure, and to this day, he yearns to be *with*

you. To walk beside you and experience all of life with you, in both the deepest valleys and the highest mountains.

Of course, the big question is: *Why?* Why would God step outside of his perfect Upper Story and come down into our Lower Story?

If you are a parent, you get it.

At some point in your relationship with your spouse, you wanted to share your life with another human being—one whom you would create together. In preparation for that new little human to arrive on earth, you did your best to create a perfect environment—perhaps a special room, a sturdy crib, comfy blankets, a fuzzy teddy bear, and bright pictures on the wall. With each passing month, you grew more excited, knowing that in just a short time, you would be joined by someone so special that you would do anything to protect and nurture this new arrival. Mostly, you just wanted to be *with* that person. Finally it was time. A tiny bundle wrapped in a soft blanket entered your life, and the joy you felt when you first looked into her face was indescribable.

So it is with God, looking into the eyes of Adam and Eve and saying, “This is *very* good.” And it *was* good—not just the creation of human life, but his plan for it. Just as parents dream of a bright future for their children, God envisioned not just a good life for us, but also a perfect one. It was almost as if God were saying, “This is going to be great. A beautiful garden. An abundance of food. No disease. No sadness. Even the lions and the lambs get along. And best of all, people to hang out with as they enjoy the pleasures of this world that I have made for them.”

Like Adam and Eve’s first chapter, your story begins with God looking into your face and saying, “This is good—this is *really* good.” Like any proud parent, he wants the absolute best for you. You desire the same thing for yourself, but life doesn’t always work the way you want it to. God intended for you to never suffer, but if you haven’t yet, you will. He wants you to experience perfect harmony with your neighbors, but you hardly know them. He wants you to live forever in the garden he made for you, but you will one day die—and besides, you don’t always feel as if you’re living in a garden. God dreamed a perfect life for you, but some days you feel as if you’re living in a nightmare.

So what happened?

In the midst of a perfect environment that God had created, something shifted. Keep in mind just how amazingly beautiful this place, *Eden* (Hebrew, meaning “delight”), actually was. Many scholars believe that the location of this garden was a fertile area where the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers meet in modern-day Iraq. The Garden of Eden was a stunning acreage. Picture a lush, verdant botanical garden. Truly a perfect environment, created as a place where God could be with Adam and Eve, a perfect home where every need was met, a paradise to be shared with God forever.

When God gave Adam and Eve a perfect home in the garden, he also gave them something else: *freedom*. Rather than force them into a relationship with him, he gave them the freedom to choose whether they wanted to be with him or go it alone. To provide a way for them to accept or reject his divine vision, God set two trees in the middle of the garden. One was the tree of life, which bore fruit that when eaten would sustain life forever. The other was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Even before God created Eve, he told Adam, “You can eat of any tree in the garden for food, but not this tree.”<sup>4</sup> God told him that if he ate the fruit of that tree, he would die. What Adam didn’t understand was that with his death, the plan God had envisioned for life together with him in the garden would die too because their choice would determine mankind’s fate from that point on.

We are not told how much time passed between this conversation and Adam and Eve’s eventual choice, but we do know that they chose to disobey God’s specific command. According to Scripture, a serpent—a creature we later learn represented Satan, the very force of evil—appeared before Eve and told her that if she and Adam ate from the forbidden tree, they would be like God. This made good sense to them, so they ignored God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>5</sup>

The tree lived up to its name. Evil was deposited alongside truth in the DNA of Adam and Eve—and in the DNA of every human being who came after them. At the core of this evil, which is called sin throughout the Bible, is selfishness.<sup>6</sup> Good looks out for others; evil looks out for self. Selfishness is the root of hatred, jealousy, violence, anger, lust, and greed. Adam and Eve are covered in it.



## *The Heart of the Story*

From that time on, the grand vision of God to dwell with us sat in ruins. Because of Adam and Eve's role as the first humans, their disobedience became an inheritance for the rest of us. Authentic love and community require both parties to choose each other, but from the beginning, mankind chose to reject God. Self-preservation became more important than anything else, and we see this played out immediately after this infamous incident.

Knowing they had done something wrong, Adam and Eve went into hiding, but God sought them out and asked if they had eaten the forbidden fruit. Instead of taking responsibility for his actions, Adam blames Eve. Eve, instead of taking responsibility for her actions, blames the snake. This brief scene depicts the now-broken community of God and mankind. Instead of walking with God in the garden, they are hiding. They do not want to be with him because they know the difference between good and bad and recognize themselves as bad. They are filled with shame, guilt, and insecurity. The relationship that God had envisioned is now broken, and God is forced to complete this chapter by banning them from the garden.

And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.<sup>7</sup>

Now why would God do this? Why would a loving God curse all of mankind with lives where we have to work hard as we live for our seventy years or so, experience disease and disappointment, and then die? How could he let a simple act of disobedience ruin the perfect relationship he desired to have with us? From our Lower Story perspective, this appears to be cruel and unusual punishment. Everybody makes mistakes, right? So these first two humans ate from the wrong tree. Aren't you overreacting, God?

Not at all. The garden—this perfect environment for doing life together

with their God—had been corrupted by their rebelliousness. Prior to their disobedience, the garden was a place of joy and innocence. For a brief time it became a place of fear and hiding. To restore the garden to perfection, Adam and Eve had to leave. Selfishness has no place in a perfect community.

Their expulsion from the garden was more than fair punishment for their disobedience; it was a continuation of God’s perfect plan to continue to be able to live in communion with the people he created. The garden would remain pure, and God would adjust his plan slightly to give you and me the possibility of living there with him forever. God is as passionate as ever in wanting to live with us and is willing to meet us outside of the garden and walk with us through every experience of life.

After they left the garden, Adam and Eve began their family, only to witness the pain of brother killing brother. The sin nature birthed in Adam and Eve has been transmitted to their offspring. In fact, as the population on earth grew, it became clear that when given a choice, men and women choose evil over good. According to the Bible, God saw that mankind had become so wicked that “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.”<sup>8</sup> Theologians call this the doctrine of depravity—a doctrine suggesting that human beings inherently will choose evil over good—that we are unable to “be good” all the time on our own, leaving us unfit for God’s community.

Here is the most mind-boggling thought contained in the pages of the Bible: even in our state of blatant selfishness, God wants us back! Plan A is obvious. Start over with the best guy the human race had to offer. His name? Noah. It is one of the few times in the Bible that the most likely candidate is chosen. A tsunami from the sky falls for forty days and forty nights. Noah and his family, along with two of every kind of animal, board the massive ark on dry land in faith and are saved. Not many days after the waters recedes, Noah’s son disgraces him by looking at his dad’s nakedness in the tent after Noah passed out from drinking too much. Maybe you do, or don’t, consider this a federal offense. One thing we know for sure is that the problem has not been resolved. Plan A fails. Even though Noah is a “good” man, he and his children are carriers of the sin virus. The solution to restoring mankind to the kind of relationship it had with God in the garden will *not* be found in us.

## *The Heart of the Story*

You would think that this would be the end of the story—that God would finally give up on us—but he didn't. He couldn't. Remember, we are his crowning achievement, created in his own image and crowned with honor and glory.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of what Adam and Eve, Cain and Noah did—regardless of anything *we* have done—God still wants to be with us. God's Upper Story has not changed. He still wants to do life with us in a perfect, loving community of unified fellowship. From this point in the story until the final chapter of the Bible, we see God's single passion unfolding, one story at a time. He wants to give you and me an opportunity to return to the garden, where we will live with him forever, and he will do whatever it takes to get us back. If the flood was not the way to begin again, then there must be another way. Time for Plan B.

CLUE: When God replaced Adam's and Eve's "Fig Wear" with the skin of animals, it signaled that it would take the blood of another to cover our sin.