

Whole Life Whole Bible

50 readings
on living in the light of Scripture

Antony Billington
with Margaret Killingray and Helen Parry

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Antony taught Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology at London School of Theology for 16 years before joining LICC. As Head of Theology, his role is to develop the biblical and theological breadth and depth of the LICC team in their ongoing work with Christians, churches and church leaders. Antony regularly contributes to the life and ministry of the local Baptist church where he is a member. He enjoys spending time with his family and friends, reading, browsing in bookshops, and working his way through DVD box sets of quality TV series.

Margaret Killingray

Margaret has been a part-time lecturer and tutor at LICC since the late 1980s. She has degrees in Sociology and Theology. Before joining LICC, she ran a teachers' centre within London University. She has written a book called *Choices* (BRF, 2001), which explores the influences that shape our thinking as Christians and the difficulty of making moral decisions in the real world. She is also an Anglican Reader and a regular writer for BRF's *Day by Day with God* Bible reading notes. Margaret has been married for almost 50 years to David, a retired professor of history, and has eight grandchildren. She enjoys reading whodunnits, especially those by Donna Leon.

Helen Parry

After training as an English teacher, Helen got married and went straight off to Africa, where she and her husband, Eldryd, taught over a period of 23 years in African universities in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Ghana. On coming back to London, Helen went on a course at LICC, got hooked and has been there ever since. Her role at LICC enables her to indulge two great passions—helping to bring the Bible to life for people and encouraging Christians to develop a global perspective. Helen has four adult children and four grandchildren, who occupy considerable periods of delightful time. She is also involved in teaching and ‘global vision’ at her church.



Preface

The 50 readings in this book began life as a special series of weekly emails sent out by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC). From May 2001 onwards, LICC's free email service, Word for the Week, has provided a short reflection on a passage from the Bible, seeking to earth scripture in real-life contexts, and reaching approximately 10,000 subscribers around the world every week. For us, as regular writers of the emails, this weekly commitment provides an ongoing encouragement to keep scripture central to the work and ministry of the Institute as well as the everyday lives of those we aim to serve.

In March 2009, we undertook the challenge of leading subscribers through the main contours of the Bible over the course of a year. The principal idea was to work our way through the biblical story from beginning to end, highlighting key turns in the plot, major characters, important motifs, and the like—but to do so in a way that tried to show how the biblical story nurtures a distinctive way of looking at the world and living in the world. The key driver was to begin to lay down a biblical basis for our emphasis as an Institute on the significance of whole-life discipleship, and to do so not simply by selecting ad hoc Bible passages here and there but by showing that a whole-life emphasis is part and parcel of the biblical narrative, from start to finish. Hence, *Whole Life, Whole Bible*.

Although all three of us have had the opportunity to edit the contributions of each of the other two, our distinctive styles doubtless remain in this finished product. We hope that this will enrich the reading process, providing a combination of theological reflection, pastoral insight and appropriate exhortation, comfort as well as challenge.

We would like to thank members of the LICC team who read the original series as it progressed and told us when we'd 'done good' and where we could 'do better'. Thanks, too, to the many subscribers who emailed us with feedback, often encouraging as well as pushing back on certain points. Thanks also to Mark Coffey for contributing Reading No. 22, bringing to his reflection an authenticity as a teacher at The Manchester Grammar School.

In the process of bringing the readings to publication, we have been helped enormously by the comments of three 'real' readers involved in 'real life'—David Lewis, Claire Robinson and Sue Rugg. No less real, but also wearing his scholarly hat, David Spriggs, Bible and Church Consultant with the Bible Society, pointed out infelicities and made many helpful suggestions which smoothed out some of the rougher edges of the material. Our colleagues Ben Care, Tracy Cotterell and Mark Greene also deserve special mention for their comments and encouragement along the way. Finally, we are grateful to BRF for publishing the readings in this revised format, and especially for the editorial support of Naomi Starkey. All of these people greatly improved the manuscript, though none of them bears any responsibility for the flaws that remain.

The *Whole Life, Whole Bible* readings represent something of LICC's vision and hope for churches and individuals—

that the whole people of God might engage with the whole word of God in a way that touches and transforms the whole of our lives, individually and together, and for the sake of the world in which we are called to live.

Antony Billington

Margaret Killingray

Helen Parry

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Foreword

Not another book on the Bible (or an invitation to a slow chew)

This one is different.

Honest.

It may not be the only book like it but it is different from lots of other books on the Bible, from most commentaries on the Bible, from a great deal of what's been written and taught about the Bible.

And it's different in a particular and vital way.

It was written for a particular and vital reason, just as John Stott founded LICC for a particular and vital reason. Back in the early 1980s, he saw with searing clarity that somehow the people of God were not able to connect the living word of God to the issues that they faced out in the world. He saw that the church leaders who faithfully and devotedly pastored them and the theological colleges that faithfully and carefully trained church leaders were teaching the Bible, but not necessarily in a way that helped people see that all of their life could be lived for the Lord, or how God's mission could be pursued in work and at school, not just in church buildings and leisure-time activities.

The gospel of Jesus Christ isn't a leisure-time gospel; it's a whole-life gospel, an everyday, every place, every task, mind, heart, spirit, hands and feet and lips gospel.

So this book takes that whole-life gospel perspective really seriously, and seeks to honour the comprehensive scope of

the salvation that Jesus invites us to participate in. This book asks, what happens if we read God's word this way? What happens if we read this book through the lens of a whole-life gospel?

Well, I think remarkable things happen: 'ordinary' people see God, see themselves, their situations, their colleagues, their opportunities, their resources, their church communities, in radically different ways. They pray differently, act differently, work differently, study differently, parent differently, play differently, eat differently, speak differently, and reach out to others differently. And that's what the Bible says God's word is meant to do:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

This book focuses on helping us see the whole sweep of scripture through the gospel of Jesus. The chapters are short and you can read them in three minutes or mull over them for much longer.

But though it's made up of bite sized chapters, it's more like a big bag of assorted toffees than a tube of Smarties.

Certainly, you could chomp through the bag quickly, but I suspect you'll find yourself lingering over many of these passages, turning them over in your mind as you might a toffee with your tongue, poking them around your mouth, feeling their contours, letting the flavours develop on your palate... Just read the reflection on the creation of humankind (no. 5) and you'll see what I mean.

As for the authors, well, I confess a conflict of interest. They

all work for me. And they are all remarkably gifted but also so self-deprecating and self-effacing that they would read any accolades I might offer and instantly file them under ‘fiction’.

I’ve known Antony Billington for 22 years, and Margaret Killingray and Helen Parry for twelve. They love God’s word, they love the God of the word, and their lives are eloquent testimony to their desire to follow and obey him in every area of life. They have all been teaching the Bible all their adult lives. They have done so in a variety of places and a variety of ways to all kinds of people—pastors and students, adults and children, builders and barristers, Brits and Barbadians and Belgians and people from pretty much every nation under the sun—and they continue to teach people how to understand and live God’s word week by week.

I commend their work to you. I am very grateful for it. And I hope you will be too.

Enjoy the chew.

Mark Greene

Executive Director, LICC



Start here

And he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

EZEKIEL 3:1–2

It is a crucial lesson for a prophet to learn: his words will not be his own, but God’s. He will not have to fabricate his message or concoct it out of thin air. He is assured that what he speaks will be nothing less than God’s word. Yet, it has to become his own before he can present it to others. He must absorb it into his own personality. And in that process of ‘digestion’, the words of God will also be nothing less than Ezekiel’s own words. He will sound like he always sounds; his mannerisms will be recognisably those of the son of Buzi; his priestly interest in all things to do with holiness and the temple will be readily apparent (along with his curious penchant for going into more detail about those matters than many of us really care for). Even so, God will embody his own words in the words of a human being, such that Ezekiel’s message will be fully God’s message.

In Revelation 10:8–10, John undergoes a similar experience. There too we have a dramatic demonstration of a prophet of God internalising the word of God. It’s a powerful picture of what we’re called to in our own engagement

with God’s word—not that we will become merely more technically competent in handling scripture, or even that we will just learn more about God and his word, but that his word will become so much more a part of us. It’s an encouragement to read the Bible and to be read by the Bible; to read not merely to be informed about God but to be transformed by God. It’s a challenge to make sure we do not stand over scripture, seeking to make sense of it, without first making sure we stand under it, allowing it to make sense of us and to shape us from the inside out.¹

This is a helpful image to keep before us as a directing principle for the ethos of the whole of our lives: as we live for Christ in the contemporary world, we seek to do so in the light of scripture.

That’s the conviction throughout the readings in this book—that the Bible itself, God’s word, sets the agenda for our lives as followers of Jesus today. And it does so not just in the ‘spiritual’ matters of the heart or merely with respect to personal values, but in the whole of life—from Monday to Saturday as well as on Sunday, in public and in private, in culture as well as in church, in work as much as in worship. Moreover, this ‘whole-life’ perspective is not limited to a few biblical passages here and there, but is part of the very warp and woof of scripture, woven through the story as a whole—from creation to new creation, from the garden of Genesis to the city of Revelation.

After this introduction, the book is divided into three parts:

- Setting the scene
- Telling the story
- Taking next steps

This is how the parts play out.

Setting the scene

This section is a mini-guide to what follows. If you're the kind of person who likes to check out maps and guidebooks and travel leaflets before setting out on a journey, start here. This part of the book considers the significance of looking at the big picture of the Bible as a whole, sketches some of the dimensions involved in taking account of the biblical story, and reflects on some of the benefits of doing so.

If you already have some sense of the lie of the land, or if you're the kind of person who likes to stride out into the relative unknown, please feel free to jump to the readings themselves and perhaps come back to this section afterwards.

Telling the story

This, the major part of the book, will take you—via some key passages—through the biblical story from its beginning to its end. We make no claim that this is the only way of telling the story; in fact, several recommended books in the 'Taking next steps' section tell it in different, though complementary, ways. In common with other such Bible overviews, a certain degree of prior knowledge is assumed. This is not a first telling of the Bible story for those who have never encountered it before, but more a retelling for those who are already familiar with its broad contours, who would like the opportunity to get to grips with the story in its entirety and consider how it impacts the whole of life.

Our first concern throughout has been to give the biblical story priority (while acknowledging that the selection of

passages already amounts to a kind of interpretive framework), to allow the story to shape our understanding of God, his world, ourselves, and our relationship with him, each other and the created world—broken but now redeemed in Christ, and all the while looking forward to final and full restoration.

The overarching desire to keep the story going has taken precedence over the impulse to find a ‘golden nugget’ of practical insight in every passage. For instance, telling the story of the Bible arguably has to include the division of the Israelite kingdom after the death of Solomon (Reading 19), even if its relevance to whole-life discipleship is not immediately apparent! But this is precisely the point—that the insights are not always found in the small details so much as in the bigger picture. In fact, in many cases, it’s not too difficult to see an implication or to trace a line of thought between the biblical story and our own lives.

Exercises or questions are included with every reading, designed to stimulate further reflection and action, in the hope that the encounter with God’s word might affect the heart and hands as well as the head. The exercises allow for different levels of engagement; some suggest following a particular topic through other passages in scripture; some encourage deeper reflection; some suggest points of application or things to try.

We envisage and hope that the readings will be used in different ways in various contexts. Here are just some suggestions.

Reading by yourself

Although the book was not designed to be read straight through in one or two sittings, some might find it helpful to do so in order to get a quick overview. If you're reading by yourself, a better procedure would be to spread the readings over a longer period of time—perhaps one a day for 50 days (or 50 working days), or even one a week for 50 weeks, reading as part of the natural rhythm of your week (first thing on a Monday morning, perhaps, or during your tea and chocolate cake break on a Wednesday afternoon).

Reading with others

Reading the Bible alone is vital for an individual's ongoing relationship with God. Reading with others brings added dimensions. The Bible itself is clear that there is an integral relationship between the word of God and the people of God, in which scripture shapes the way we think and the way we live—together—as part of an ongoing commitment to serve God faithfully, together. Reading with others helps to prevent privatised readings of the Bible and corrects some of the biases we may bring to certain passages or topics. Others see things I don't see; others have insights I don't have; others face challenges I don't face. All of this means that, especially where the group members grow to trust each other, there is great benefit in reading together and sharing together. This being the case, you may find it helpful to go through the readings with others—with a friend or spouse, prayer partners or colleagues at work, or in a church small group—using the questions to prompt discussion.

Reading on location

Whether by ourselves or with others, where we read scripture adds some interesting elements to how we read scripture. An increasing number of people are reading the Bible, alone or with others, in public spaces—coffee shops being an obvious favourite. Once again, there are enormous benefits in doing so, aside from the empowerment that comes from doing something in a group that we might not do if we were alone. Perhaps most significantly, a public context—on the train travelling into work, say—helps to ‘normalise’ reading the Bible, making it natural to seek connections with the day ahead, encouraging us to think how the Bible relates not just to us in our everyday contexts, but to the people around us—the harassed parent, the young accountant, the lonely pensioner.

Taking next steps

Many of the exercises attached to each reading suggest some specific next steps in reflection and response. In addition, this final section recommends other resources on scripture and discipleship, which will take further the journey embarked on here.



Setting the scene

The ‘tipping point’ might come about through a probing conversation at work, a family incident or a forced change of circumstances, or via consistently faithful teaching in church, a good book or a casual conversation with a fellow Christian. However the realisation dawns, at some point today’s disciples of Christ discover what the first disciples discovered, that being a follower of Jesus involves much more than changing a few features of our lifestyle here and there. It requires a complete reordering of the whole of our existence in loving service to Christ himself, whose call embraces every area of our lives. How we should understand the biblical basis of this comprehensive call and its implications for everyday life is the burden of this book. As the title suggests and as the readings seek to show, such whole-life discipleship is best funded by the whole of God’s word: whole-life disciples are to be whole-Bible disciples, those who are shaped by the big picture of scripture.

Whole Bible: reading the story of life

As it happens, ‘story’ has become a significant category in contemporary discussion, with many suggesting that one of the characteristics that marks human beings out as distinctive is that we are story-making and story-telling animals. Every day of our lives, we do things or things happen to us or other people’s lives intersect with ours, and—often without even

thinking about it—we link these ‘events’ and ‘characters’ together in a sequence that makes sense of them and gives meaning to them, a sequence that, if we were asked to do so, we could relay to others. We all have and tell and are submerged in various interconnecting ‘stories’, all of which shape our lives in different ways.

For Christians, however, the most crucial story for determining our identity, for shaping the way we think and live, is the biblical story. Moreover, story is the primary means through which God has chosen to reveal himself in scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, from the garden of Eden to the city of the new Jerusalem, the whole Bible can be seen as an epic narrative: a story that begins with God as Creator, focuses on Israel as the people who will bring God’s blessing to the nations, and (the New Testament declares) has come to its promised fulfilment in the redemption brought about through Christ, the one in whom God’s purposes for the universe will be consummated.

In fact, the broad contours, or main acts, of the biblical story line can be highlighted in six words:²

- Creation
- Corruption
- Covenant
- Christ
- Church
- Consummation

Christians look to the biblical account of *creation* for their understanding of what it means to be human, created in the image of God. The opening chapters of Genesis describe the place of humans in relationship to the world and to each other,

as well as our capacity to relate with God. They affirm that the material world was created good, that man and woman were created good, that male–female complementarity is good, that procreation is good. Alas, the story goes on to show us that things don't stay good.

Corruption creeps in. We see how sin has tragic effects on our relationship with the world, with each other and with God. The Bible pictures the harsh reality of human existence under the rule of sin: men and women rebel against God and are unfaithful to each other; they become alienated from others, relating through suspicion, envy, greed, pride and anger.

Thankfully, the biblical story goes on to show how God makes a *covenant* with a chosen people. It tells of God's promises to Abraham, and the beginning of the nation with the patriarchs. The people go to Egypt during Joseph's time and then out of Egypt with Moses at the exodus. There is the confrontation with God at Sinai, the giving of the law, the sacrificial system, the tabernacle and the establishment of the priesthood. Then, what follows is the taking over of Canaan, the promised land, under Joshua, and eventually the rise of the monarchy, with David settling the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem, followed by the building of the temple. After Solomon, however, comes the division of the kingdom into north and south, with God's judgment coming upon both kingdoms, the south eventually going off into captivity in the sixth century BC, with the subsequent restoration back to the land under Ezra and Nehemiah. Among all these events arise a number of ways of looking forward to the coming of a 'redeemer' figure—an anointed one, a prophet like Moses, a priest in the order of Melchizedek, a king, a son of man—all meshed into the story.

Then the story tells of God becoming flesh and living among us in *Christ*. God himself is embodied as a human being—not as an end in itself, but because the only way humanity can be rescued from sin and its consequences is through the restoration achieved by Jesus’ death on the cross on our behalf, in order to bring about renewed relationship with God, with each other and, ultimately, with the rest of creation.

The story doesn’t end there, for Christians meanwhile belong to the *church* of Christ, a people in whom God’s Spirit lives, which shapes our character and mission in distinctive ways. Under the new covenant, the people of God are no longer a nation with geographical boundaries; the people of God are now an international community, themselves the temple of God’s presence, with God’s law written on their hearts. And we look forward to the *consummation* of all things—Jesus’ return, new resurrected bodies and the remaking of the universe. Until then, we remain on the way to becoming fully restored, our identity finally complete at the end of the story as we join with all nations walking in the light of the Lamb.

Even to relate the story in this way (and to acknowledge that others may tell aspects of the story differently) is to show that the Bible doesn’t offer a bare chronicle of historical facts, but tells a narrative that carries theological significance, in which we see God at work—creating, judging, promising salvation, lovingly and faithfully working out his plan of restoration. It should come as no surprise, then, that this all-encompassing plan of salvation carries implications for the lives of those called to follow Christ.

Whole life: following the Lord of life

Knowing the ingredients of the story is one thing; understanding the import of the story is something else. We limit ourselves here to highlighting three implications of the big story of scripture for our lives as disciples of Christ.

1. For building our understanding

Survey after survey in recent years—carried out with people in churches, leaders and non-leaders, as well as non-church people—has confirmed that there is an increasing lack of biblical literacy in the church, not only in society more generally. The surveys reveal that the vast majority of people in churches feel positive about the Bible and consider it to be revelation from God, but fewer and fewer, it seems (even church leaders), are reading it for themselves. And when we do manage to read it, the surveys suggest, we're not always sure what to do with it.

Some might go so far as to say that there is a crisis of confidence in the Bible. This is largely because of the questions it raises. One of the understandable temptations, perhaps, is to want quick answers to all the difficult issues—about creation and evolution, about the strange laws, about the harsh violence, about the bizarre visions, about men and women, about same-sex relationships, and so on. But those questions are better addressed, and more securely answered, when we have a larger framework in place.

Looking at the big story of the Bible offers a crucial means of helping to address the issue of growing biblical illiteracy,

because it provides a way not just of getting to know the ‘bits and pieces’ of the content of the Bible (individual stories or passages), but of understanding how those bits and pieces relate to each other in the grand story. As we would hope and expect, increased knowledge of the parts over time strengthens understanding of the whole, as well as building confidence in knowing how to handle the seemingly more tricky parts of the Bible. A strengthening in our understanding of scripture’s big picture also develops our trust in God himself as we see him faithfully working out his plan of salvation through history.

2. For forming our worldview

Christian thinkers have sometimes compared the Bible to a pair of spectacles. We look through scripture as through a set of lenses to see God, the world around us and ourselves more clearly. This being the case, it is the big story of the Bible that best informs and forms our worldview. God’s word gets ‘inside’ us, as it did for Ezekiel when he was called to eat the scroll handed to him by the Lord (Ezekiel 2:8—3:3), and transforms us—transforms the way we think about the world, so that we begin to see things as God sees them. In crafting a Christian worldview, then, we do so on the basis of the biblical story and its major plot points: God’s original creation, the tragedy of sin, and God’s plan of redemption, set in motion through Israel, fulfilled in Christ, lived out through the church and awaiting final consummation.

This is one of the central points made by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen in their book, *The Drama of Scripture*. In a culture where many stories shape us and compete to describe the nature of reality, it’s the biblical story that should

be central to the formation of a Christian worldview. They argue that we mustn't try to fit the Bible into a convenient space in our world, but must fit our world into the Bible, to find our place in the story of the Bible, to immerse ourselves in it, so that we begin to think and live out of its perspective. Then the whole biblical story will shape our worldview and mould the way we view God, the world and ourselves.³

3. For shaping our discipleship

It's not too much of a stretch to move from considering the Bible as a narrative to considering it as a drama, which also makes it possible for us to think in terms of performance—how we live out the story. Hence, we are partakers rather than spectators: every one of us, in our own individual way, has a role in the continuing drama of God's unfolding purposes.

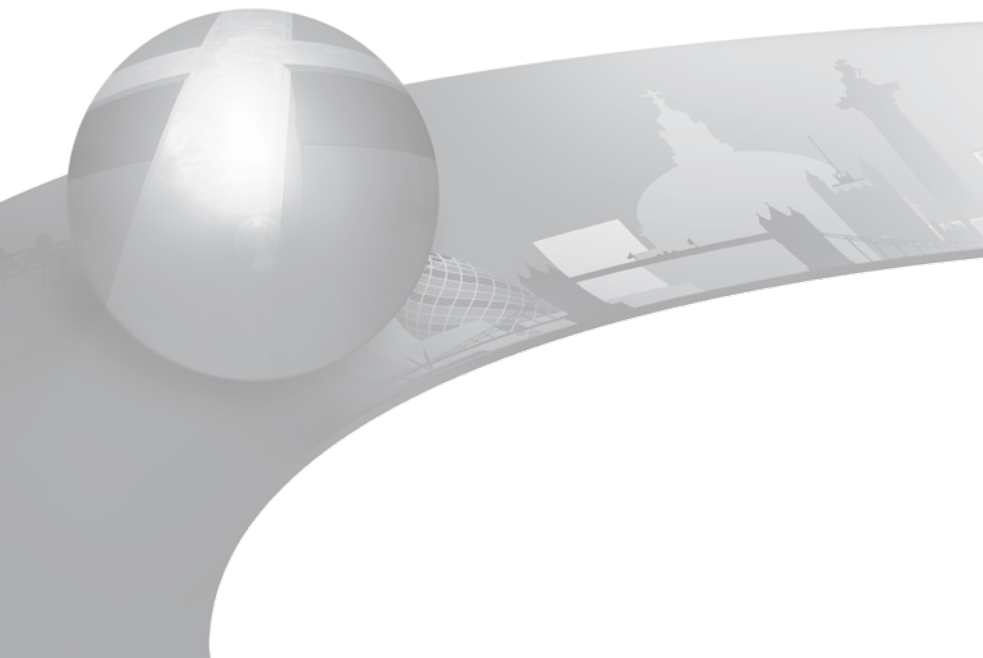
What we need to do, according to this 'drama' analogy, is to immerse ourselves in the biblical script, to live imaginatively in its account of the world, to gain a deep appreciation of the mind of the author and the movement of the story. In doing so, over time, we grow in our understanding of what it means to be created beings, our realisation that the world is not what it should be, our joyful apprehension that Christ became flesh, lived among us, suffered and died, and our delight in the goal of God's work for the whole of creation. In short, we seek to find our place in God's story, so that it becomes *our* story. We live in such a way that we seek to embody God's original intent for creation as well as the hope of consummation, guided by the way God has shaped his people in communities in Israel and the church. And the story shapes us in the process: it shapes how we think and

how we live, our giving, our hospitality, our use of time, our sexual activity, our business deals, our political views, the way we bring up our kids, the way we relate to each other, and the way we see the world and people in the world.

It fashions us in these areas because it's a story that begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. It's a story that is creation-affirming rather than world-denying, in which God continues to maintain the world he created. It's a story in which men and women were created in his image to enjoy communion with him and each other, and to exercise loving and responsible stewardship over every field of human endeavour in his good creation. It's a story which reminds us that while sin cuts us off from relationship with God and the effects of sin spoil every aspect of life, yet God, out of his love and free grace, brings about complete restoration through the cross of Christ. It's a story which provides a vision of God's kingdom that is as broad as life itself, which encourages us to grasp the amazing reach and comprehensive scope of the gospel and Christ's Lordship, as we are called to embody his rule in our everyday lives as homemakers, teachers, artists, businesspeople, athletes, politicians, lawyers, journalists, labourers and nurses.

The Lord of life calls us to live our lives in the light of his word.

Telling the story





Introduction

1: The Lordship of Christ

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

COLOSSIANS 1:15–16, 19–20

Jesus... Well, where else could we start exploring the main contours of the biblical story? With creation, perhaps? Yes, and we will get to it soon—though we shall find Jesus there before us. Or, on the basis that we best understand the beginning from the perspective of the end, could we start with the consummation of all things? Again, yes, and that will be in our sights—though we shall find Christ there ahead of us.

Paul wrote letters, not narratives, but it is the biblical story that funds his pastoral engagement with churches, and that story sometimes bubbles to the surface, as it does here in Colossians 1:15–20 (and Philippians 2:5–11), where we are taken from creation to consummation through the cross in six verses. And at the heart of it all is Jesus.

So, we begin with the one who embraces both beginning and end, who stands at the heart of God's plan for the ages, himself the image of the invisible God, the Lord of creation and redemption—for the sake of his church. Since all things were made through him and all things will be finalised in him, there is nothing left that does not come under his Lordship. The creator, sustainer and reconciler of all is none other than Jesus, the Lord of all.

Along with the confession of Jesus as Lord goes the assurance that there is no part of ordinary, everyday reality that falls outside the orbit of his loving oversight. As Paul makes clear in the rest of Colossians, Christ's Lordship has implications for every area of life—to the extent that what funds our discipleship, our marriages, our working days and our engagement with the world in which we live is not just the truth about Jesus as creator and redeemer of all things, but our relationship with him as Lord and with each other as his people.

Jesus is Lord—begin here.

For further reflection and action

1. How does Colossians 1:15–20 broaden our horizons on life, and what difference might that make to how we go about our next task, our next conversation, our next meeting, our next purchase?
2. Read and reflect on Philippians 2:5–11, noting from the immediate context (2:1–4 and 12–18) how those who are 'in Christ' are shaped by the story of Christ.

3. In the first-century Roman imperial context, where Caesar is in charge, there are political implications in confessing Jesus as Lord. What are the imperial rulers—the ‘Caesars’—of today? How do they exercise their ‘lordship’, and how does Christ’s rule subvert theirs?

2: I’ll tell you a story

*My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.*

PSALM 78:1–4

Human beings tell stories, stories that weave individuals and their families into wider communities of place and time. They sing the story of the ancestors who built their village; they learn of the Romans who came and named their towns; they ferret around in the archives to discover their Russian great-grandparents; they say, ‘I’m Scottish’, ‘My grandmother was a slave’, ‘My father was in the D-Day landings’. And so, through story, they tie themselves in to place and time.

The Bible, the story of humankind’s relationship with God, also tells stories. In fact, one story unfolds from beginning

to end, with many contributing stories of individuals and nations, which reflect, repeat and enlarge the grand narrative. This narrative (as we saw in our first reading) holds Jesus Christ at the heart of it—Alpha and Omega, creator, redeemer and final judge.

So, the psalmist says, listen to the story; tell it to your children—how God brought you out of slavery under the sign of the lamb’s blood and led you on a journey to nationhood. That story is told over and over again in the Old Testament, and it illuminates a new and greater story of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In that process, it invests with new profundity other stories: the day of Atonement, Isaiah’s suffering servant, the lamb silent before its shearers.

When the pivotal moment of the whole history of God’s dealings with humanity took place, and a newborn baby was laid in a manger, Matthew tells us that this baby was part of the human story. His family line descended from the great heroes of God’s people, Abraham and David, but also from the smaller stories of faithfulness and redemption, such as Ruth the Moabite and Bathsheba the Hittite (see Matthew 1:1–17).

We too have the privilege of hearing the story and recognising our own place in it. ‘Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,’ the Lord told the Israelites at Sinai (Exodus 19:5–6); and, through Peter (1 Peter 2:9), he tells us—the scattered people of God—that we are now that holy nation and priestly kingdom, looking ahead to the time when the final curtain comes down on the old world and we reign with him in a renewed earth.

For further reflection and action

1. Some of the psalms tell the story of God's dealings with his people—for example, Psalms 68, 78, 105, 106 and 136. Read and reflect on a few of these. As Christians, we own this as our family story, too: it is as much about us as about Israel. What hints do these psalms provide as to how the story shapes our everyday lives as disciples of Christ?
2. In addition to some of the psalms, other places in scripture summarise the story to a certain point in time: see Deuteronomy 1—4; 26:5—10; Joshua 23—24; Judges 1—2; 1 Samuel 12; 2 Kings 17; Nehemiah 9; Ezekiel 16; 20; 23; Daniel 9; Acts 7:2—52; 13:16—41. Again, read a few of these passages and consider what features keep recurring in the telling of the story (this might provide clues as to what is seen as significant), and think about why the story is being told (that is, what does the teller of the story want to achieve by telling the story?).
3. 'Christians are not utopians. Although we know the transforming power of the gospel and the wholesome effects of Christian salt and light, we also know that evil is ingrained in human nature and human society. We harbour no illusions. Only Christ at his second coming will eradicate evil and enthrone righteousness for ever.'⁴ How would you support this statement on the basis of the story the Bible tells?



Creation

3: And God...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

GENESIS 1:1; 2:4

Our first steps in Genesis begin neither with creation nor with ourselves, but with God—and the reminder that we do not properly understand the world (or our place in it) without acknowledging the God who created it, holds it together and rules over it.

Genesis 1 was designed to work this way. The people of God knew that the real God—the only God—made the world not through violence and bloodshed (a regular feature of tales about origins told in cultures surrounding Israel) but by his word, through his wisdom, and out of love. The account thus shapes the way God’s people think and live, at the same time as engaging with alternative takes on reality, in such a way as to say, ‘*This* is the true God; *this* is what the true God is like; *this* is the one who alone is worthy of worship.’

Genesis 1 does this not by discussing creation in the abstract but by focusing on God as creator, and not primarily through nouns or adjectives but through verbs, highlighting what God does: he creates, he speaks, he sees, he names, he separates, he rules, he delights, he blesses, he rests. This God who speaks and acts will take centre stage in the plot

that unfolds, showing that, far from removing himself from creation, he is personal and relational, intentionally providing an arena in which men and women can live under his rule and blessing.

It's no surprise, then, that while Genesis 1:1 can use the non-specific word for 'god' or 'gods', Genesis 2:4 makes it clear that he is 'the LORD God', using the name by which he later reveals himself to Moses as the one who will establish a covenant with his people, setting up a link between creation and covenant that will be played out in the rest of scripture.

Genesis 1 isn't designed to satisfy our curiosity about issues raised by science. A different and more significant question is at stake, namely: which God do we trust to have the whole world in his hands? Standing at the heart of the Christian worldview is not a god of our own making, but the Lord God himself—creator God and covenant God.

For further reflection and action

1. Take some moments to read through Genesis 1:1—2:4, pausing after the account of each day to reflect on—and then to praise—God as creator, sustainer and ruler of all.
2. In Proverbs 8:22–31, God's wisdom is personified as a craftsperson through whom God makes the world—designing, measuring and setting boundaries in place—showing that wisdom is the standard by which God works as he crafts the world. This being the case, where do we see evidence of God's wise ordering of the world? What difference should this make to the way we seek to live in God's world?

3. What do you bring to your reading of Genesis 1 in terms of background education, church tradition, scientific knowledge and convictions about God? How might these various factors both help and hinder your understanding of the passage?

4: It was good

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

GENESIS 1:31

‘Good.’

There can be no mistaking how God evaluates his creation. The affirmation comes six times in Genesis 1, to make sure we don’t miss it. The repetition makes it clear that each part is good, climaxing at the seventh time with the statement that the sum of the parts is ‘very good’. God doesn’t just create the world; he creates the world *good*—very good.

The fact that the word is applied to stars and seas and trees and turtles suggests that something more than moral goodness is in mind. Think ‘good’ in the sense that Genesis 1 itself implies: a well-ordered, beneficial, fitting, beautiful, teeming-with-life, everything-in-its-place goodness. From the intricate parts to the immense parts, all of it is good.

Nor is the goodness of creation to be limited to ‘nature’. Human society and culture are also embraced, with the goodness of work and marriage affirmed as spheres in which we may serve God—the architect at her desk, the baker in his kitchen, the mother in her home, the teacher in his class, the husband and wife in their bed. All of it good.

For Christians, it is a reminder on the first page of the

Bible that our faith is world-affirming, that we may delight in the goodness of God's created order. It should come as no surprise when God wants to show up in areas of our lives from which he has sometimes been excluded—our careers, our friendships, our studies—since the world has been designed with our well-being in mind, as a place of blessing for us.

Alas, things don't stay good. But the evil that comes later is not an inevitable or necessary part of the fabric of the world or of human beings, and the Bible anticipates a time when evil will be removed. Meanwhile, God's good creation provides a strong clue that 'being saved' by God is not about being released from an evil body for a non-material existence. We may expect that the salvation Christ brings is not a rescue from the world but a salvation for which the world was made in the first place—a new creation, no less (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Much more than a claim about the process by which life came into being, a biblical perspective on creation involves a response of praise to the God on whom the whole of life depends, and who is the source of everything that is good.

For further reflection and action

1. What do today's different 'voices' say about the physical and cultural and social world in which we live? (Think politicians, media pundits, lobby groups, and so on.) How far do these voices square with Genesis 1?
2. Reflect on the actual difference the 'goodness' of creation will make to specific areas of your life today and this week—your work, rest, family, money or time. How do we live distinctly as servants of God in his good creation?

3. It has been regularly noted that on days 1–3 God forms the world (Genesis 1:3–13), and on days 4–6 he fills the world (Genesis 1:14–27). What he separates on days 1–3, he stocks on days 4–6, first making the ‘realms’ and then assigning their ‘rulers’. What might this suggest about the literary qualities of the creation account? And what might this careful structuring of the account teach us about the nature of God’s work in creation, and creation itself?

5: The first great commission

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

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

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

GENESIS 1:26–28

What is to be the role of human beings in the story about to unfold?

It’s the sixth day, and the author of Genesis 1 makes it clear—through devoting more space to it, through repetition, through the divine ‘let us’ which first plans and then executes the plan—that something even more significant is about to

happen. Now the creator forms a creature unlike any of the others, who bears his image.

We give thanks that we have been created with the capacity for emotion, the ability to think and communicate—like God himself—although it’s not apparent that his ‘image’ should be identified with these abilities. It is clear that man and woman together constitute the image of God, and that humans are made for relationship with each other as well as with God. Even so, sexual differentiation extends to dolphins, chickens and elephants as well—making it an integral part of God’s design for the world but not necessarily the most significant point about being made in his image.

More notable is the connection of the image with the vocation of men and women to rule creation, as representatives of God on earth, charged with the task of ‘dominion’ over other creatures. Cultures surrounding Israel told creation stories in which people were made as slaves of the gods, with the language of ‘image’ applied only to kings. In Genesis, however, all human beings are created in the image of God, giving men and women a status and responsibility not found in other worldviews.

Genesis 1 continues to shape our views of humanity—and our lifestyles, too—since the tasks of ‘filling’, ‘subduing’ and ‘ruling’ have not been taken away. In the first place, of course, these words refer to the building of families, the growing of crops and breeding of animals, the tending of the garden to which Adam is called. Creation requires cultivation.

Such cultivation, though, provides the basis of the organisation of society and includes, by extension, the development of culture and civilisation—building houses, designing clothes, writing poetry, playing chess. These are the ‘mundane’ ways in which we, this very day, exercise our creation mandate, as

we represent God's rule over every type of cultural activity, in relationship with others and in a way that reflects God's own nurturing, creative hand.

For further reflection and action

1. Try to spend some time reflecting on the fact that the first purpose of humanity is not 'spiritual' (in terms of the way that word is commonly understood), but the somewhat ordinary category of exercising stewardship over our earthly environment as God's representatives. This being the case, what is it that occupies the bulk of your waking hours? Work, education, home, childcare? How is the image of God demonstrated in these areas of life?
2. Read and reflect on Psalm 8 and its links to Genesis 1. In what ways does its portrayal of human beings as 'crowned with glory and honour' (v. 5) shape our perceptions of ourselves and others?
3. If our fellow human beings, Christian and non-Christian alike, share the mandate to 'cultivate' the earth, what are the implications for the way we treat their work, art, products and so on? Are there any areas of cultural 'cultivation' that might be considered suspect? Advertising, cosmetics, fashion, interior design, contemporary art, weapons manufacturing?