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# An Introduction to Whole Life, Whole Bible

A journey through Scripture in 50 readings

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## Setting the scene

At some point – perhaps through a difficult incident, a deep conversation, or impactful teaching – we realise that following Jesus involves more than changing a few aspects of our lifestyle. It requires a complete reordering of our whole existence. We are called to whole-life discipleship: loving service to Christ that embraces every area of our lives. *Whole Life, Whole Bible* lays out the biblical basis for that comprehensive call and its implications. Whole-life discipleship is rooted in whole-Bible discipleship, shaped by our place in God’s unfolding story for us and for the world in which we live.

## 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 storyline can be highlighted in six words:



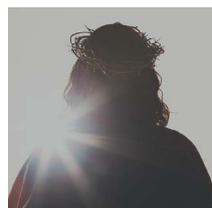
Creation



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. 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.**



**Our 50-day reading plan, *Whole Life, Whole Bible*, walks you through the story of the Bible and helps you think through letting it shape your whole life – at home, at work, in the neighbourhood. The bite-size readings and real-life application questions help illuminate God's plan to renew all areas of life. Written by talented Bible teachers Antony Billington, Helen Parry, and Margaret Killingray.**

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