



FINDING YOUR PLACE IN GOD'S GREAT STORY

A Book
About
the Bible
and You

PAUL BASDEN & JIM JOHNSON

FINDING
YOUR
PLACE IN
GOD'S
GREAT
STORY

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To the Preston Trail family.

It's been a privilege and joy to bring
messages from God's Word to you
for the past twenty years.

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THE POWER OF STORY

Star Wars.

The Avengers.

Harry Potter.

Lord of the Rings.

X-Men.

Other than making a boatload of money, what do these film franchises have in common?

They all tell stories. Exciting stories. Thrilling stories. Addictive stories.

Once you get started watching, you can't stop. That's the power of a good story.

Story is all the rage these days. Authors and musicians and screenwriters all aim to craft the best stories they can so that we will read their books, listen to their songs, and watch their movies. With storytelling as a model, expert consultants can teach you how to improve your business presentations and increase your market share.¹ The power of story seems to know no end.

But story is not just something you read on a page or watch in a theater. Story is also something you live. You see, *you* have a story. Everyone you know has a story. Even God has a story. And that's the premise of this book.

GOD HAS A STORY

Have you ever thought about how friendships are formed? They usually start when you say to someone, "Tell me about yourself." Then after listening a while, you return the favor. Along the way, you come to understand one another. When you know someone's story, you know *them*. When they know your story, they know *you*.

This is true in the spiritual realm as well. Suppose you were to ask God, "Would you please tell me about yourself?" God might reply, "Sit down. It's going to take a while. Are you listening? Do you really want to know me? If so, here's my story." That divine story is found in only one place.

GOD'S STORY IS TOLD IN THE BIBLE

When you hear the word "Bible," do you start to yawn? Do you see Scripture as a set of rules to obey? A list of propositions to believe? A series of stories to learn?

Ugh!

If that's what we think, we have missed it. We have failed to realize that at its very heart the Bible tells God's story. It is the epic narrative of the Creator creating this world...of the world failing to become what he intended because of human sin and evil...and of God redeeming it all and eventually making it exactly as he envisioned. God has a story. It's a tale that stretches from creation to re-creation, from Genesis to Revelation, from beginning to end...and even on to a new beginning that will *never* end.

In one sentence, God's story as revealed in the Bible is this: God created a world of humans whom he could know and love, and despite their stubbornness and rebellion, reconciled them to himself through his own sacrificial love. All the other stories in the Bible find their fulfillment in that Great Story.

GOD'S STORY HAS EIGHT CHAPTERS

The Bible is filled with hundreds of stories. You can read about Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Joshua, David and Goliath, Elijah and Elisha, Ruth and Esther. And that's just the Old Testament! In the New Testament we encounter Mary and Joseph, Jesus and the Twelve, Peter and John, Herod and Pilate, Paul and Barnabas, and the list goes on.

While all are important, we have chosen to retell God's story in eight chapters. We have selected what we believe are the primary historical movements in the biblical story. The eight chapters correspond to these movements. Each chapter also focuses on a strategic character whom God uses to advance his Story. Taken together, these eight chapters tell God's Great Story. The overall story arc goes like this:

- God creates (Adam and Eve)
- God blesses (Abraham)
- God rescues (Moses)
- God chooses (David)
- God warns (Hosea)
- God saves (Jesus)
- God sends (Paul)
- God wins (John)

GOD'S STORY HAS A LOT OF LITTLE STORIES AS WELL

Between the eight big stories, you will find hundreds of little stories. Some are important to the overall plotline; others, not as much. But if you are not at least familiar with their basic contours, the Big Story can seem disjointed.

So between chapters you will find what we are calling “The Story Between the Story.” These seven summaries will take you on a whimsical tour of the many narratives we can't tell. They highlight the people and events that will fill in the gaps of your knowledge. The style is different from chapters 1 through 8. It's more playful and lighthearted—even snarky at times. And it's that way for two reasons: First, we want the overall story arc to be complete, even if the minor narratives are merely summarized. And second, we want you to enjoy learning what otherwise could qualify as Bible trivia. A spoonful of sugar still helps the medicine go down.

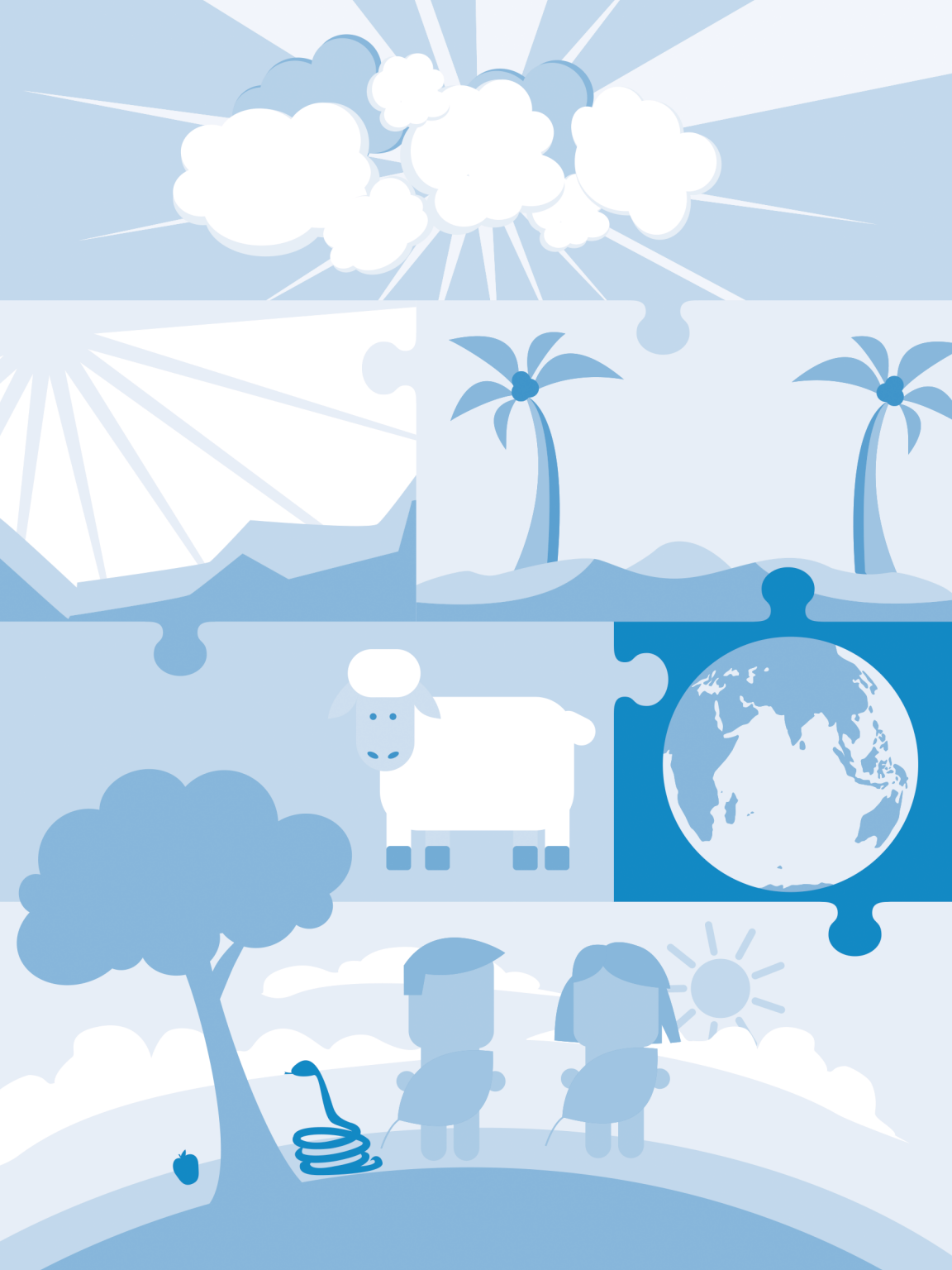
GOD'S STORY MAKES SENSE OF YOUR STORY

You probably know what it's like to lie in bed at night and ask, "Why is my life turning out like it is? Why has my story taken all these twists and turns?" You may be thinking about today's bloopers, yesterday's blow-ups, or last year's blunders. Wherever your mind goes, you want to make sense of it all.

If you're not making much progress, it may be that you're focusing only on your own life. Why not expand your vision and look at your story in light of God's story?

Seeing your life in light of God's story is the only way to make sense of your story.

So have a seat and listen up. God is about to tell you his Great Story.





GOD CREATES

Before there is space or time or anything else that we categorize as part of our world, there is God. Majestic and mysterious. All in all. Nothing and nobody else.

In infinite wisdom, and out of eternal love, God decides to create a world of beauty and order. He also decides to create humans to live in that world. He will make them like himself, able to think, feel, will, relate, and create. This means that they will be free, able to choose, capable of saying yes or no to their Creator.

So he starts creating.

And the results are breathtaking. At the mention of a mere word, galaxies whirl into place, oceans fill the deep spaces, and living creatures appear to rule them all. God takes a special interest in humans, endowing them with gifts and abilities to oversee his whole creation. This is the story of creation in a nutshell.

CREATION AND GENESIS 1

When you hear “God creates,” what do you picture?

Do you picture the glories of the universe?

- The amazing auroras of the Northern Lights?
- The sun-drenched beaches of Hawaii and Barbados?
- The rugged grandeur of the Grand Canyon and the Grand Tetons?

Or do you picture the nasty arguments that have plagued the church?

- The Copernican Revolution, in which Copernicus and Galileo challenged church teaching with their claim that the earth revolved around the sun, not vice versa?
- The Scopes Monkey Trial, where defense attorney Clarence Darrow portrayed Christians as dunces for believing in creation?
- Science textbook debates, which have politicized the issue by asking whether science is an enemy of faith or its friend?

Thankfully, the creation-science conversation is friendlier now than at any time in recent memory. Productive discussions are taking place. But as important as that is, we have a different focus. We want to tell God's Great Story. And the first chapter is all about creation.

So in a spirit of discovery and humility, we invite you to open your Bible to the opening chapters in Genesis. As you do so, remember that *how* you read

Genesis 1 is as important as *what* you read there. Here's how we suggest you read these iconic chapters.

HOW TO READ GENESIS 1

Genesis 1 Is Prehistoric

When you read the word “prehistoric,” don't picture a triceratops fighting a tyrannosaurus rex, or a snaggletoothed caveman defending himself against both. “Prehistoric” means that these events occurred before history was recorded. The earliest Bible event that we can date with any accuracy is the call of Abraham, which occurred around 2000 BC.¹ Genesis 1 describes ancient events that not only predate Abraham but also point to the earliest moments of cosmic history. That means nobody was there from Eyewitness News to get the story. No human observed the act of creation, writing it all down for posterity.

We believe that God created the heavens and the earth. We also believe that someone under God's guidance wrote about it at a later point. But we don't know how much later. What we do know is that the creation story describes events that occurred before people wrote down history. That's what prehistoric means.

Genesis 1 Is Prescientific

The ancient Hebrews had no knowledge of the Copernican revolution—they had no idea that the earth revolves around the sun. Yet God was pleased to reveal himself to people who never dreamed that the sun was the center of the universe. When he inspired them to write Genesis 1, God did not whisper, “Pssst, since you are writing this down for posterity, be sure to give a heliocentric worldview.

It won't make sense to you now, but it will to future readers." It's laughable when you think about it that way. Genesis 1 is geocentric, and that is apparently fine with God. If you're a science-lover, don't let this bother you—any more than it should bother you that David described his own intrauterine development without benefiting from the modern science of embryology. Yet I wouldn't want to remove these words from the Bible:

You created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 I know that full well.
 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place,
 when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
 all the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.²

Would you?

While David was scientifically naive, he was theologically right on target. Don't get your science from the Bible any more than you get your theology from science.

Genesis 1 Is Theological

"Theology" is a rich word that comes from two Greek words: *theos*, which means "God," and *logos*, which means "study." Genesis 1 is primarily a study of God. These chapters tell of a God who created a wonderful world in which he placed

intelligent humans and designed them to thrive. It's the story of a world where people are designed to enjoy a close connection with God, with one another, and with all of creation. To say it more simply, Genesis 1 is not about *how* and *when* the world was created, but about *Who* created it and *why*. If you focus on the *how* and *when*, you will treat those who disagree with you as enemies...or you will regard science as the enemy. And you will miss what God is trying to say to you about himself. But if you look for the *Who* and the *why*, then this deeply theological passage will yield rich insights.

So let's dive in.



THE MAIN CHARACTER IS GOD

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”³

While you will meet many characters in Genesis, the creation story is all about the Creator.

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING

The chronology that the author uses is seven days. In Hebrew, the word “day” is *yom*. Your calendar may alert you to the annual celebration of the Jewish holy day called *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. *Yom* can mean a literal day, and

in the Bible, it often means just that. But it doesn't have to mean a twenty-four-hour period of time. It can also refer to an unspecified period in the future. This is what it means when the prophets tell Israel to beware of "the day of the Lord," when he will judge his people. They weren't promising that God would execute his judgment within the parameters of twenty-four hours, but that however long it took, God would eventually implement his verdict. When we read how the story of Israel tragically ends,⁴ this is exactly what we find. "The day of the Lord" took several decades, sometimes even centuries, to occur.

We believe that when "day" is used in Genesis 1–2, it points to an indefinite period of time, not to twenty-four literal hours. It refers to however long it took for God to create the heavens and the earth. But it's okay if you think differently on that issue. What matters is that we agree on what's most important: God created it all. Whether he did so instantaneously or gradually, whether "day" means literally twenty-four hours or figuratively points to a long period of time, God is still the Creator.⁵

Now let's look at each of the "days" of creation.

Days one, two, and three point to the three spheres of reality that God has created. These spheres describe the limits and boundaries in which we live: time, space, and earth.

Day One: Time

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.⁶

Before God created this world, time as we know it didn't exist. Father, Son, and Spirit interacted with one another throughout eternity—timelessly, effortlessly, joyfully. But with the introduction of day and night, time came into existence. Time refers to the progression of events as we experience them, from future (unknown) to present (now) to past (memory). While we mark time at a macrolevel (centuries) or at a microlevel (seconds), mostly we mark time in terms of days. We ask ourselves, "I wonder what today will hold for me?" We pray, "Give us today our daily bread." We say, "One day at a time." Day one is all about time.

Day Two: Space

Then God said, "Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth." And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. God called the space "sky." And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.⁷

The dimension of space refers to the open skies immediately over us, outer space way above us, and "deep space" astronomically beyond us.

Day Three: The Earth

Then God said, "Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear." And that is what happened. God called the dry ground "land" and the waters "seas." And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. These seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came."

And that is what happened. The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.⁸

Earth includes land, along with all the God-ordained gifts and processes we call vegetation, which become the basis for human sustenance. Plants, trees, and fruits are given to nourish us. So in the three “days” of creation found in Genesis 1, we see God creating time, space, and the earth.

Days Four, Five, and Six

When we come to days four, five, and six, we see that the events are carefully orchestrated. Each day points to an assigned ruler over the spheres named in the first three days.

Day four identifies the sun and the moon as God’s creation. What would their role be? The sun would rule the day; the moon would rule the night.⁹ Day five corresponds to day two. What’s created on day five? Birds and fish—birds to fill the open space above us, and fish to fill the deep watery space below us. The birds rule the air, the fish rule the sea.¹⁰ On day six, God creates animals and humans, referring back to day three. What did God do on day three? He created the earth. And the humans and animals on day six are called to rule it.¹¹

GOD RESTED

The story ends with day seven. That’s when God rested.

So the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when he rested from all his work of creation.¹²

If you think the phrase “God rested” meant God was exhausted after spending six days making galaxies and gorillas and geckos, you’re not alone. Many of us picture God as being so worn out that he needed a divine nap. If so, we’ve missed the point.

Day seven does not depict the rest of exhaustion—it points to the rest of celebration. Everything is in its right place. Everything is in order. Everything is functioning just like God intended. This is what *shalom* means. And this is what God celebrated when he looked at all he had done.

GOD CREATED HUMANS

We skipped over something on day six that is pretty important. Let’s go back.

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

So God created human beings in his own image.
 In the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."¹³

The apex of all creation is humans who are made in the image of God. You could hardly find a more revolutionary teaching: mortal, finite humans are created to be like the immortal, infinite Creator! This doesn't suggest that no other creatures bring glory to God—no doubt all do. Although in my humble opinion, gnats and mosquitoes are questionable...as are rats and snakes. But according to Genesis, we know that humans, of all God's creation, are made like God.

Being created in the image of God means that our mind, emotions, and will reflect the thinking, feeling, and willing of God. More than anything, it means we are made to relate like God relates to us. God is relational, so he has put the same capacity and drive into each of us. We are designed to connect meaningfully to God and to others. We are also made to govern the world on God's behalf, to represent him on the earth as corulers, cocreators.

But God sees that something isn't quite right. So he addresses it head-on.

GOD CREATED MARRIAGE

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him..."

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the opening. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man.

“At last!” the man exclaimed. “This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called ‘woman,’ because she was taken from ‘man.’”

This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.¹⁴

When God looks at the man, he exclaims, “Wait a minute! You still look lonely to me!” God’s answer to human loneliness is marriage. With all its promise and pitfalls, marriage is a gift from God. That doesn’t mean you are inadequate if you are unmarried. (I’d hate to tell Jesus that his life was incomplete because he never married.) But for most humans, marriage is the norm. It is God’s designated answer to loneliness.

A Deeper Look at Marriage

As we look deeper into Genesis 2:22-24, we see four things about God’s original intent for marriage. First, marriage was to be binary: between a man and a woman. Second, it was to be exclusive. The man leaves his parents and is joined to the woman. He does not stay with her for a while, then leave and join himself to another woman, then repeat that pattern as often as he wishes. Third, marriage is to be permanent, which is the meaning behind “the two are united into one.” Finally, it is a relationship of equality. Both are made in the image of God, with equal access to God. The best marriages are characterized by mutuality, partnership, and deep respect.

WHAT CREATION MEANS TO US

When you reflect on God as Creator, you will likely be inspired and moved.

Creation Is a Gift

God did not have to make the world. He didn't have to make you. Creation wasn't necessary as if God were incomplete and needed something to fulfill him.

God created simply because he wanted to. Why? Because God is love. It's that simple. Before the world came into being, God existed as three-in-one Majesty. Living in a circle of perfect love, Father, Son, and Spirit freely related to each other, joyfully reveled in each other, and humbly submitted to one another. There was never a time when the Father did not love the Son and the Spirit, or when the Son did not love the Father and the Spirit, or when the Spirit did not love the Father and the Son. In that circle of threefold unity, God was so filled with love that he decided to create humans in order to have someone else to love. That's a gift, pure and simple.

Creation Is Good

In Genesis 1 the word "good" is used six times to describe creation, and "very good" is used once. What God made was originally wonderful. We know from experience that sin and evil have defaced it and made it ugly. But that does not diminish the beauty of the original creation. (You'll have to wait for chapter 8 to see how God finally redeems what we humans have messed up!)

Creation Is Purposeful

God's meta-purpose is not stated in Genesis 1–2, but it's clear in the New Testament: creation is through and for Jesus. Although the name *Jesus* is not found in Genesis 1–2, we can imagine God saying to his beloved Son before all creation, "Son, I want us to build something together. It's going to be spectacular! And when we finish building it, I want to give it to you as a gift." As the apostle Paul writes in the New Testament:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme
over all creation,
for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can't see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the
unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.¹⁵

THE REST OF THE STORY

The Story Goes South

Creation is chapter 1 in God's Great Story. It's a picture of beauty, power, and grandeur—the stuff of dreams come true. But soon the dreams turn into nightmares. The story goes south.

What happens? Adam and Eve decide that they want to be like God. They want to know all that their Maker knows. They want to create their own lives, without reference to the One who created them. Simply put, they rebel.

The results are dreadful. Sin enters the world. Our enemy secures a foothold. The image of God in humans is disfigured. Married couples struggle. Siblings kill each other. Nations go to war. Eden seems lost.

But that's not the end of the story.

God Doesn't Give Up

Despite the rebellion of the human race, God doesn't give up on his fallen creatures. We are still the apple of his eye. He is determined to fulfill his purposes for creation, whatever it takes. The rest of God's Story shows the extent to which he is committed to that vision.



It's one thing to say you *believe* in God's Story. It's an altogether different thing to say you *belong* in God's Story. But you do. All of us do. As Genesis 1 winds up, we discover our job description as humans in God's creation.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."¹⁶

We are to govern and rule over God's creation. Here's what that means.

You Are God's Apprentice

While God is senior Creator, he has chosen to make you one of his junior creators—a business partner, if you will. He wants you to use your intellect and imagination to create human culture. Utilizing your energy and ingenuity, he invites you to create (and constantly improve) the building-blocks of society: agriculture and commerce, art and music, technology and science, politics and

education, family life and leisure. The scope of God's vision for your creativity is breathtaking. He wants you to help make the world more like he intended it to be. You are his apprentice.

You Are God's Manager

While God owns all he has made, he has entrusted you with its management. This raises the topic of how we treat the heavens and the earth. Sadly, the environmental debate has degenerated into a shouting match—lots of heat but little light. Whatever your thoughts on the topic, however, one thing is abundantly clear: Christians should lead the way in promoting and living out wise and healthy ways of caring for God's good creation. We must pass on a habitable world to the next generation.

You Are God's Representative

A representative is someone who officially mirrors the vision of one nation to another nation. That means God has appointed you to embody him in the world. He has placed you on earth to mirror to others who he really is and to love those whom he deeply loves. Here's what being a representative might look like in your circles of influence.

Representatives at Home

A mom in our church was worried about her teenage daughter and some questionable decisions she was making. The mom didn't want to come on too strong with the Bible, so she asked if they could read a devotional together each night. The daughter said yes. As a result, they had many deep, personal conversations about faith and life. This mother was gently mirroring God's love to her daughter. She was faithfully fulfilling the role of God's representative.

Representatives at Work

We have a friend who has the rare combination of high IQ and high EQ. He could make a good salary in the private sector if he wanted to. Instead, he chooses to work in a governmental agency. His job is thankless. Few people show gratitude, and many are demanding and hostile. Yet he remains in this job so he can serve people and show them the character of Christ. He feels like God has called him to the public sector so he can reflect God's character to a watching world. He is God's representative in a federal workplace.

Representatives in Your Neighborhood

We know a handyman who can fix anything. (And we should know—we can't fix much of anything.) But one of his greatest gifts is the way he serves his neighbors. While he lives alone with his Rottweilers, he sees all his neighbors as family. He invites them over for burgers and steaks, does free repairs on their homes, and provides them with a sense of community and connection. He is God's representative in his neighborhood.

Representatives in Your World

When the world shows you ugliness and hatred, reflecting God's love seems impossible. But some have found a way to mirror God's love to their enemies. In the summer of 2015, several families in Charleston, South Carolina, lost loved ones when a deranged killer opened fire on parishioners on a Wednesday night at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. When some of the survivors spoke to the assassin two days later at his court appearance through videoconferencing, what they said stunned the world:

"I forgive you," said the tearful daughter of victim Ethel Lance, 70. "You took something very precious from me and I will never talk to [my mother] ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

"I forgive you," said Anthony Thompson, the husband of slain wife Myra, 59. "But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that he can change it, can change your ways no matter what happened to you and you'll be okay. Do that, and you'll be better off than what you are right now."¹⁷

In his grace, the Creator has written you into his story of creation. You have an important role to play as apprentice, manager, and representative. Don't underestimate the significance of being a human creature in the Creator's world.

JUST THE BEGINNING

God's creation of the world is just the beginning of his Great Story. What's next? In the following chapters we encounter a God who...

- blesses the world by beginning a new nation through an old Bedouin shepherd and his wife,
- rescues his people from slavery and delivers them to the Land of Promise,
- chooses a young man "after God's heart" to lead his people,
- warns his people through prophets that they must straighten up if they are to be his people,

- saves the world through a Jewish carpenter who is also the Son of God,
- sends the Good News out into the world through a rabbi-turned-apostle, and
- wins the final victory over sin, evil, and death by ushering in a new heavens and new earth.

Buckle your seatbelts!

THE STORY BETWEEN THE STORY

After Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden, they have Cain and Abel. The first recorded case of sibling rivalry happens when God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's. It gets intense. Cain kills Abel, is banished from his family, settles east of Eden, marries, has a son he names Enoch and founds a city he names...Enoch. Apparently, while Cain was a great farmer, he was not a creative thinker.

As more and more people fill the earth, mankind becomes increasingly wicked. God is sorry he ever created humans, and his heart is broken. In all the earth, only Noah is righteous, so God instructs him to build a huge boat to save the animals and his family from a catastrophic flood. After the waters recede and they're again on dry land, Noah builds an altar to offer sacrifices to God, and God gives a rainbow as a sign of his covenant to never again destroy all living things.

God blesses Noah and his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply, which seems to be the one commandment humans can obey. Soon the earth is populous, everyone speaks the same language, and they think they're the coolest thing since sliced bread (which has not yet been invented). With the goal of displaying their general awesomeness to the world, the people build a great city with a tower reaching to the sky. God says, "Yeah, no," and confuses their language so they stop building and scatter.

One of Noah's sons, Shem, has a particularly important lineage: Shem has Arphaxad, who has Shelah, who has Eber, who has Peleg, who has Reu, who has Serug, who has Nahor, who has Terah, who has Abram, who lived in the land of Ur.

Abram marries a woman named Sarai. His father Terah takes Abram, Sarai, and Abram's nephew, Lot, and heads from Ur toward Canaan. But they stop and settle in Haran.

And that, in a nutshell, is the story between the story.