

The Story-Line of the Bible

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ACT ONE: GOD ESTABLISHES HIS KINGDOM (CREATION)

The curtain opens on the Biblical drama—its first act is God’s creation of the universe. As a supreme ruler, God calls all things into being by His sovereign decree. Each creature plays a part in this grand symphony of creation, and every part is declared “good.” God’s creative work climaxes in His creation of human beings to be like himself and to rule the world as His stewards. These first human beings, Adam and Eve, enjoy warm and close fellowship with God in the garden as they carry out their task of looking after the world, delighting in and developing its rich potentials, and thanking God. By the end of act one, the curtain closes on a ‘very good’ world.

ACT TWO: REBELLION IN THE KINGDOM (FALL)

Bright anticipation characterises the opening of act two. God gives Adam and Eve everything they need; their lives are rich and full as they delight in God and the gifts He has given. God places one restriction on them: they are not to eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden or everything will be ruined. By submitting to God’s word, Adam and Eve learn the joy of living as trustful and dependant creatures. But Satan offers another word, a lie, by which Adam and Eve can live. In a tragic twist, they listen to the lie of Satan and contravene God’s command.

This treasonous act of rebellion sends shock-waves throughout the whole creation. Adam’s and Eve’s rebellion corrupts the warm friendship they had enjoyed with God as they walked together in the garden, delighting in God’s presence and gifts. They find themselves estranged from God and hide from His presence. Their revolt also damages relations between human beings. Adam’s and Eve’s relationship to each other becomes one of selfish mastery. The effects are soon seen as their son Cain murders his brother, Abel, and as violence and evil spreads among the earth’s growing population. Their apostasy further ravages the harmonious relationship enjoyed previously between humanity and the non-human creation. Every relationship and every part of human life is now defiled by their betrayal. Already, even death has entered the world. As the curtain closes on act two, Adam and Eve are in the middle of a mess. The whole world is now befouled by their rebellion.

ACT THREE: THE KING CHOOSES ISRAEL (REDEMPTION INITIATED)

Scene One: A People for the King

Rising Tide of Sin and God’s Faithfulness

As the curtain rises in act three, one burning question remains: how will God respond to a world that has chosen to go its own way and that continues to ignore his good plans? To start, God brings judgement; He expels Adam and Eve from the garden. But God also brings hope when He promises to crush all the evil forces that Adam and Eve have unleashed in their foolish mutiny (Gen. 3:15). The next few millennia, recorded for us in a few brief chapters (Gen. 3-11), are the story of two interwoven developments:

the increasing darkness of sin and God's faithfulness to His promise to banish that darkness.

The tide of wrongdoing continues to rise. It reaches a peak in Noah's time, and God decides to destroy the earth with a great flood and start over again with one family. God saves Noah from the great flood on a large boat. After the flood, Noah's descendants turn out to be no different from their predecessors (cf. Gen. 6:5 and 8:21). Like the previous generation, they ignore God and go their own way. This continued rebellion climaxes in the building of the tower at Babel, a monument to humanity's treasonous revolt (Gen. 9:18-11:1-9).

But amidst sin's forward march, God has remained faithful to His promise. When the righteous Abel was killed God raised up Seth and a godly line that would remain faithful to Himself (Gen.4:25-5:32). When the whole world became wicked, God preserved Noah through His judgement (Gen.6:8). After the flood, when Noah set foot on dry ground, God promised that He would protect the world from disaster and recover it again from the ravages of human rebellion. Yet this long period of human sinfulness and God's faithfulness ends on a sour note. In the story of Babel the whole world turns against God.

Recovery Plan for Creation: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

In spite of human rebellion, God does not abandon His plans for His world. About two thousand years before Jesus, God sets into motion a plan that will lead to the recovery of the world. This promised plan has two parts: First, out of this mass of rebellious humanity, God will choose one man (Josh. 24:2). God will make this man into a great nation and give that nation a land and bless them. Second, God will extend that blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18).

The rest of the book of Genesis traces the ups and downs of this two-fold promise. The promise is given not only to Abraham but also to his son Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4) and his grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15). Many dangers threaten God's promised plan along the way: impotence and barrenness, foreign kings and their harems, natural disasters, hostility with surrounding people, and the unbelief of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, themselves. Through it all, God shows Himself to be 'God Almighty' (Gen. 17:1; Ex. 6:3), the One who has the power to carry out his plan.

Nearing the end of his life, Jacob moves his twelve sons and all their families to Egypt in order to escape a famine. The riveting story of his eleventh-born son, Joseph, shows God's faithfulness and control of history as He manages to preserve a people through whom He will bring salvation to the world (Gen. 45:5; 50:20).

Freed from Slavery and Formed as a People

Four hundred years elapse before the story resumes. Abraham's descendants, now known as Israel (the name God gives to Jacob), grow numerous in Egypt. But success brings its own problems. Egypt's king begins to perceive this expanding racial minority as a threat. To stamp out the perceived danger, Pharaoh reduces Israel to slavery. The book of Exodus opens at the height of Israel's oppression under Egypt. Into this scenario of intense pain and tyranny God chooses Moses to liberate Israel from the brutal rule of Egypt so that Israel can return to God.

In a series of amazing incidents, ten plagues bring God's judgement on Egypt's gods (Ex. 12:12), and Israel is miraculously saved from the powerful Egyptian army as they cross the Red Sea. Finally Israel arrives at the place where they will meet God—Mt. Sinai. There God meets Israel in an awesome display of lightning and fire. Why has God

done all of this for Israel? God has a job for them to do. They are to be a nation and kingdom that function like priests. Their task is to mediate God's blessing to the nations and to act as a model people attracting all peoples to God (Ex. 19:3-6). This is the calling that will shape Israel from this point on: they are to be a showcase people and model before the nations that embody the beauty of God's original design for human life. After giving them this task, God gives them the law to guide their lives, and the people of Israel commit themselves to living as God's faithful people. God then commands them to build a tent where he will take up residence. From now on, wherever they go, God will live visibly among them.

In Leviticus we see how Israel is to live in communion with a holy God. The book of Numbers contains the story of Israel's journey from Sinai to Canaan. Unfortunately Israel's unbelief requires that they spend forty years in the wilderness before arriving at Moab, on the threshold of the promised land. In Deuteronomy, Israel's leader, Moses, instructs Israel on how they should live when they arrive in the land. Israel is poised to enter the land—they are committed to being God's people and showing the nations around who God is and the wisdom of His original creational design for human life. As Israel sits poised for entry, Moses dies and the leadership is passed on to Joshua.

Scene Two: A Land for the People

Entering the Land: Joshua and Judges

The book of Joshua tells us how God keeps his promise to give Israel the land. The Lord leads Israel in conquering the land and judging its wicked inhabitants, and then he distributes the land among the twelve tribes. The book ends with Joshua's pleas for Israel to remain faithful as God's people. Judges opens with Israel's disobedience: they refuse to wage war with unbelief and to purge idolatry from the land (Ju. 1). God comes in covenant judgement and tells Israel that they will now have to live among the Canaanites (Ju. 2). Judges tells a sad story of how Israel turns from God and continually succumbs to the Canaanite pagan worship and lifestyle. God finally lets the Canaanite and neighbouring peoples rule and oppress them until Israel cries to Him for help. And He responds in mercy, raising up military leaders, known as judges, to rescue them. With each cycle of rebellion, though, the situation gets worse. The book ends with two stories that illustrate Israel's foul rebellion and with Israel's repeated cry for a king to deliver them from this mess (Ju. 21:25).

Kings and Prophets

Samuel is the last great judge, as well as a priest and prophet. The books of Samuel, named after him, tell of a time of great change within the Israelite nation. Israel asks God to give them a king so they can be like the other nations (1 Sam. 8:5, 19-20). So God uses Samuel to appoint Saul, and then David, as the first kings over His people. Saul is a failure as a king, but David serves God as a faithful king, defeating Israel's pagan neighbours, enforcing God's law, and moving God's residence to Jerusalem. Here, at the hub of the nation, God's presence is a constant reminder that God is Israel's real king. Solomon, David's son and successor, builds the temple as a more permanent place for God to live and hear the praise and prayers of His people.

Despite being given great wisdom from God, Solomon's marriages to foreign women lead him to worship other gods, and his ambitious building projects earn him a reputation as an oppressor. During the reign of his son Rehoboam, this oppressive spirit

results in the splitting of the nation. The majority of the tribes break away in the north (Israel), leaving behind a few southern tribes (Judah).

From this time on, the two halves have their own kings. The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell their stories. The story is of a downhill slide into rebellion led by unfaithful kings. Far from being a showcase to the nations, God's people push his patience to the point at which He expels them from the land. God seeks to halt their deadly course by raising up prophets to call them back to repentance. Elijah and Elisha are the prophets who feature most prominently in 1 and 2 Kings. Through these prophets, God promises that if Israel will return to him He will be gracious and continue to work with them. He also warns that if Israel continues to rebel He will bring judgement and finally send them into exile. As Israel's situation becomes more incurable, the prophets promise that God has not given up. In fact, He promises He will send a future king who will usher in a reign of peace and justice. This promised king will achieve God's purposes for His creation.

The words of the prophets fall on deaf ears. And so, first the citizens of the northern kingdom (722 B.C.), and then the citizens of the southern kingdom (586 B.C.) are captured as prisoners by the ruling empires of the day.

Exile and Return

The ten tribes of the northern kingdom are scattered to the corners of the earth. The two tribes of the south go into exile in Babylon. 'Beside the rivers of Babylon we thought about Jerusalem, and we sat down and cried', says the writer of Psalm 137. 'Here is a foreign land, how can we sing about the LORD?' (137:1, 4). Exile is a devastating experience for the Israelites. What happened to God's promises and purposes? Had he given them up for good? During this exile, God continues to speak to them through prophets like Ezekiel, explaining why this crisis has come and assuring them that they still have a future. After over a half decade in exile, the way is opened for Israel to return to Jerusalem. Some return; but most do not. In time, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, Jerusalem and the temple, which had been burnt by Judah's invaders, are rebuilt. But Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple are only shadows of their former selves.

The Old Testament ends with Israel resettling in the land, but resettling on a small scale and facing huge threats. They live in the shadow of the super-powers of their day. With the promises of the prophets echoing in their ears they wait for the day when God will act to deliver them and complete His redemptive work. As the curtain falls on act three, Israel has failed to carry out the task God gave them at Sinai, but hope remains because God has made promises.

INTERLUDE: A KINGDOM STORY WAITING FOR AN ENDING (INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD)

Between the end of act three (Old Testament) and the beginning of act four (New Testament) there is an interlude of four hundred years. This period is called the intertestamental period. During this time, Israel continues to believe that they are God's chosen people and that God will act in the very near future to bring His kingdom. Under the oppression of the Persians, Greeks, and, especially, the Syrians and Romans, the flame of hope ignited in Jewish hearts is fanned into a raging inferno. How God's kingdom will come, who will bring it in, and what way to live until it comes—on these things there is much difference among the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes.

But all of Israel agrees: their story is waiting for an ending. The kingdom will come soon. And so they wait in hope.

ACT FOUR: THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM (REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED)

Act four. The curtain rises. Into this setting of feverish anticipation for God's kingdom steps a young Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth. He announces the kingdom has come—*in him!* God is now acting in love and power to restore the creation and humanity to live again under the kind rule of God, the way God designed it all in the beginning. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell the story of this man Jesus, who claims to be sent by God to accomplish the renewal of the creation. Jesus, however, is not the kind of king Israel is expecting. He is not the freedom fighter who will throw off the Roman yoke and make Israel great again. In fact, he seems more like a wandering teacher or prophet. Though he announces the arrival of God's final entry into history, nothing seems to happen. Jesus goes about gathering a small community of insignificant followers around him and calls them the new vanguard of God's coming new world. God's power to restore is evident as Jesus heals people and frees them from evil spirits. His invitation extends beyond the 'washed' and acceptable: he welcomes religious and social outcasts into his new community. As he challenges the customs and expectations of the day, he arouses growing opposition among the leaders. Jesus teaches his followers to live lives steeped in love, forgiveness, and righteousness. He tells them stories to help them understand the unusual way in which God's new rule was coming. The kingdom is coming, not by destroying your enemies but by loving them, not by using force but by suffering, not by revenging but by forgiving, not by retreating from the 'unwashed' but by compassionately involving yourselves in their lives.

Jesus does not meet the expectations of his contemporaries for what the coming king will look like. So, who is he? Jesus poses this very question to his followers. Peter answers in faith: 'You are the Christ, anointed king, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). Indeed, his followers believe Jesus is present to reveal who God is and what He is doing to recover the world.

But the majority of Jesus' fellow Jews do not recognise him. Opposition to his work mounts until they arrest him, put him on a mock trial, and take him to the Roman governor for execution. Jesus is handed over to suffer the most appalling of all deaths—Roman crucifixion. Surely no king would die such a disgraceful death! Yet his followers declare weeks later that it is at that very moment—in the shame and pain of the cross—that God accomplishes his plan to recover his lost and broken world. Here Jesus takes the sin and brokenness of the world on himself so that the world might be healed. He dies, nailed to a cross, to take the punishment that a guilty humanity rightly deserves. It is now possible for the world, and all people in it, to be made right with God.

How can his followers make such a preposterous claim? Because of the resurrection! They believe Jesus walked out of the grave and is alive from the dead. What astonishing news! Many people, even a crowd of 500, see Jesus alive. His resurrection is the sign of his victory over evil; it is the first evidence of a new world dawning. But before that new world comes fully Jesus gathers his followers and gives them a task: 'You are to continue doing what you saw me doing' (John 20:21). 'You are to make known God's coming rule in your lives, your deeds and your words. God's new world will come in time. When that happens, everything that resists that rule will be destroyed. But until then, announce its coming and show by the way you live that it is a reality. I limited my work,' Jesus says, 'to Israel. Now you are to spread this good news of

God's coming world through the whole world.' After these instructions Jesus takes his rightful throne, in heaven at the right hand of God.

ACT FIVE: SPREADING THE NEWS OF THE KINGDOM (THE CHURCH'S MISSION)

Scene One: From Jerusalem to Rome

The book of Acts begins with the sudden and explosive coming of the Holy Spirit, whose coming the prophets and Jesus, himself, had promised (Acts 2). He comes, intent on bringing the new life of God's kingdom to all who turn from sin, believe renewal has come in Jesus, and are baptised into the emerging kingdom community. This new community is established and commits itself to doing those things that God promises to use to renew in them the life of the resurrection: the Word of God, prayer, fellowship with one another, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). As they do this, the life of God's kingdom more and more shows itself in Jerusalem, and the church begins to grow. The church spreads from Jerusalem to Judea and into Samaria. Then a new centre is established in Antioch (Acts 11:19-28). Here too, Jesus' followers embody the life of the kingdom, like the Jerusalem community does. But the church at Antioch also catches a vision for taking this good news to places where it has not been heard. And so they commission two men, Paul and Barnabas, for this task (Acts 13:1-3).

Paul plays the biggest role in the spread of the good news throughout the Roman Empire. He was once a militant enemy of the church, but a dramatic encounter with Jesus turns him into a leading missionary to the non-Jewish world. On three separate journeys he travels throughout the Roman Empire establishing churches. He writes thirteen letters to these newly founded churches to encourage them and instruct them about how to live as followers of the risen Jesus. These letters, along with others, eventually are collected into the New Testament. Each of these letters continues today, in the twenty-first century, to give valuable instruction on what to believe about the good news and how to live faithfully under God's rule in our daily lives.

Getting back to Acts, Paul is finally arrested and shuffled from one official to another, from one hearing to the next. The book of Acts ends with Paul being transported to Rome and living there under house arrest. Not a very satisfying ending to a dramatic story of the spread of the gospel! But Acts ends without finality for a reason. The story is not finished. It must continue to unfold until Jesus returns again.

Scene Two: And Into the Entire World

This is our place in the story! The story of God's people, growing in numbers and gathering from every nation into one community, has continued for 2000 years, and it continues today. Any who hear the call of Jesus to follow him must centre their lives in him and commit themselves to living the life of God's kingdom. Faith in Jesus brings the gift of the Spirit, a foretaste of the full kingdom meal that is yet to come. To use a different metaphor, the church is now a preview of the coming kingdom. The church picks up Israel's task of being a showcase of what God intends for human life (Ex. 19:3-6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-12). The church is to continue the kingdom mission that Jesus began among the Jews, a kingdom established now among all the people of the earth. The church today is guided by the stories of the church in Acts as it faces new and very different contexts for its mission. The mission of God's people is to make known the good news of the kingdom. This is what gives the contemporary time period its meaning. And since the rule of Jesus covers the whole earth, the mission of God's people is as

broad as creation. In effect, God's people are to live lives that say, 'This is how the whole world will be some day when Jesus returns!'

ACT SIX: THE RETURN OF THE KING (REDEMPTION COMPLETED)

Jesus promised that one day he would return and complete the work he had begun. And so his people live in the confident expectation that every challenge to his loving rule will be crushed and that the His kingdom will come fully. When he returns, the dead will be raised and all people will appear before him in judgement. God's opponents will be overthrown, earth and heaven will be renewed, and God's rule will be complete.

The last book in the Bible is Revelation. In that book John is ushered into God's throne room to see how things really are. He is shown that, whatever evidence exists to the contrary, Jesus, whom the church follows, is in control of world events. He is moving history toward its appointed end. At that end, the old world dominated by evil, pain, suffering, and death will be overthrown. God will again dwell among humanity as He did in the beginning. He will wipe away tears. There will be no more death, mourning, pain, suffering, or evil. With joy, those of us who have followed this story anticipate hearing God's own voice: 'I am making everything new!' (Rev. 21:5) The marvellous imagery of the last chapters of Revelation directs the reader's gaze to the end of history and to the restoration of the whole of God's creation. He invites all the thirsty to come even now and to drink the waters of life but warns all those who remain outside the kingdom. The Bible ends with a promise repeated three times—'I am coming soon' (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20). And we echo the response of the author of Revelation: 'Yes! Come Lord Jesus.'