

year of  
biblical  
literacy



**SMALL GROUP**  
follow up material

## **Introduction**

Tom Wright says *“The Bible is not simply an authorities description of a saving plan but rather part of the saving plan itself, living with the authority of scripture then means living in the world of the story that it tells.”*

This ancient set of writing, that we read, hold and know is not simply a detached group of texts that we blindly follow but rather the preliminary narrative of the story we find ourselves in today. It is not a book of rules and rigid structures but rather a living, breathing text that tells the continuous story of God. Without living it, we cannot tell it.

Narrative theology, the view that the bible is descriptive of an ongoing, cohesive story, divides the narrative into 6 acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Jesus, The Church and New Creation.

We find ourselves today in the 5<sup>th</sup> act, “The Church”, but it is within this wider unfolding story of who God and His purpose for creation that we are invited to live.

## **Act 1 - Creation**

### **Overview**

The creation narrative of Genesis 1-2 is primarily focused not on “how” God created the world but rather “why”. It is what the ancient writers would have understood as a “true myth”; a means of communicating truth through story; similar to how Jesus spoke truth through parables.

The creation narrative portrays a chaotic, uncultivated world, a wasteland from which God creates. God created a creative creation. The world was created good and we are created with an inherent “goodness”.

### **Ask yourselves**

- What does the idea of “good” or “goodness” conjure up for us?
- Is that “goodness” limited to those within the church? If not, how do we factor in sin and brokenness?
- Where can we see examples of the intrinsic “goodness” of creation within the world today? How can we work *with* this for the furthering of the Kingdom of God?

### **Read**

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:5-24.

Reflect further on what this says about “why” God created humanity? Who are we and what is our purpose? How does that work in a Genesis 3 world?

### **Unpack**

The Hebrew word “*Adam*” simply means “humanity”. The Genesis creation narrative tells of our creation, both male and female, as equally made within the image of God. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century worldview, the notion of “image” is significantly different to that of the ancient near east.

The writers of Genesis want to us to grasp that Eden is God’s garden temple in which He placed his idol, humanity. We are to be divine image bearers within his temple. We are created to both reflect who he is, his character and nature, as well as to join with him in the ongoing work of creation. Given that we are now in a post-fall world, it is also a work of redemption.

We also see that humanity is designed to be relational. The only time creation is presented as “not good” is when the human (*Adam*) is without appropriate relationship or community. We live in a cultural context of increased interconnectedness fuelled by the growth of social media, and yet ironically there is an epidemic of loneliness within our society.

So, to resolve this problem we see in Genesis 2 that God forms "Eve". Eve means "life" and so when joined with the idea of Adam as "Human" it is presented that "Human life is good".

It is within this context of relationship and community that we are tasked and privileged to join God in the renewal of all things. This is reimagined and extended through Jesus, who calls us to "go make disciples". The new creation work is about bringing the intended Kingdom of God into a chaotic world; to people, the environment and in all things. We are created, to be creative and join the creator God in recreating the created world.

This is our "cultural mandate". What we do *in* the world as the church, as well as in the Christian community, matters. Who we are created to be, our passions, talents, abilities, our God given vocations, whether that be medicine, science, teaching, architecture, gardening, cleaning or anything else, must be understood as our way of joining God in recreating our world.

This is the work of making *shalom*; aiding the flourishing and wholeness of all things.

### **Ask yourselves**

- What impact does this have on how we view "non-Christians" or those around us that we feel uncomfortable with?
- How do we see the intrinsic good within all people, not just those that display goodness? What does discipleship mean in light of this idea?
- How does this impact our approach to our work, sense of calling and the various roles in our lives we have?
- How do we approach the seemingly mundane and repetitive nature of our lives?
- What is mission? What will a world made new look like?

### **Taking it further**

**How could you write yourself a job description to reflect your identity and calling as a divine image bearer and creative co-partner of God?**

**What could you do together as a small group, or encourage one another to do, to either create something new or redeem something broken?**

## **Act 2 – The Fall**

### **Overview:**

We only need to switch on the news, look on social media or often stand on our own high streets to know that our world, as Eugene Peterson puts it, is “in the middle of a mess”.

The Bible, as we have been exploring, is a collection of living ancient texts and narratives, some of which can be viewed as “true myths”. Genesis 3 is one of these that brilliantly presents why the world is how it is, why we are how we are and what God has done and will do to make things right.

### **Read:**

Re-read Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 & 3:14-19 together.

What leaps out? What did you not notice before the talk or today?

How does the explanation for sin, brokenness and death help us make sense of our world and what we experience as humans – sickness, disease, war, greed, abuse, selfishness, unforgiveness, conflict?

### **Unpack:**

The snake is introduced into the drama of scripture not as a stranger, but as a well-known creature to Adam (he after all, named all the creatures!). Those writing or hearing Genesis 3 would have understood that the serpent represents chaos and disorder. He questions God, showing his “devious” character, and questions the framework in which God offers relationship to humans. In effect, he is questioning the love of God and whether or not we can trust Him as the Creator.

The temptation, presented by the snake to Eve, is to seek moral autonomy, to be self-discerning and to live without the Creator. Or put another way, to reject being the image bearers of God in the world in favour of being independent creatures (this in itself is chaotic, as our very being is rooted in being made in God’s image). This is the same temptation that each of us face every day. Will we trust God and put our life in His hands or will we choose to rule our own lives and attempt to be human without Him?

Where there was once original “goodness”, because of the rejection of God’s created order by humanity there is now original “badness” or sin. Sin is what happens when we take God’s beautiful, free world and relationship with Him and each other and screw it up.

Cornelius Plantinga defines it helpfully for us, saying that “sin is the culpable disturbance of Shalom”. It is humanity acting contrary to our created identity and creative mandate.

This is highlighted when we see the difference between Adam and Eve's nakedness. There is a contrast in that the word "naked" is purposely used differently within this story. In Genesis 2 there is a sense of innocence, of beautiful unawareness, of just being. In Genesis 3 there is a distinct idea of judgment, of awareness and separation between both God and each other. This ultimately leads to blame shifting, denial and a breakdown of relationships. Rather than a unified creation, there is now a disruption and disintegration of community.

Theologians explain the consequences of sin as "the curse". Contrary to the way the world or the church, has often viewed this, God does not curse humanity. Everything around us in creation is cursed but we are not. Marriage, childbirth and relationships become hard and work becomes dissatisfying.

Sin dehumanizes us. It corrupts who we are and what we do, both personally and communally. Genesis 3 demonstrates that what we do, or what we don't do, has a far reaching effect on each other, the world and God. Your sin is never contained just to you.

The consequence of this is that humanity is expelled from Eden because God is aware that, when combined with our conditional immortality through the tree of life, our gaining of knowledge through the tree made us like Him. For the sake of the creation project God simply could not allow this.

Despite all this, there is a beautiful glimpse of grace in the narrative of Genesis 3. God had a plan to restore both creation and us. He makes the promise that a descendent of Adam and Eve, one of our own, will crush the snake (chaos and disorder, deception) after the snake has first been allowed to hurt them. This is what theologians call the "proto-gospel" moment, a picture of Messianic promise to Israel. We understand this to be Jesus who through his redemptive life, death and resurrection conquers sin, evil and thus death.

The promise is given that the Creator, in Jesus, will step into our story and will rescue creation and us. Even before they leave the garden, God begins this plan in his clothing of Adam and Eve. The Ancient Near East saw the stripping of clothes as a sign of disowning. God clothes them, he reaffirms that they are His, even in the rawness of their rebellion and sin. Grace is present from the very beginning; we are clothed, covered and kept by God because, despite our sin, we are still "very good".

**Ask yourselves:**

- What do you think when you hear the word sin?
- Do you primarily see sin as an individual issue or something that is communal?
- How does the idea that sin is never individual affect our behavior?
- Rich suggested that sin is not just something we do or say, but also something we *don't* do or *don't* say – how does this help us more accurately face up to our shortcomings as humans?
- Does the stark contrast of rebellion of humanity and the immediately undeserved grace offered by God change the way in which we view our world and those within it who have not come to Christ? i.e. do we stand apart and judge or do we reach in and serve?

**Taking it further:**

What does it mean for the church to “clothe” the world? How might seeing mission simply as “extending grace” revolutionise our approach to those we’re sent to?

How does all this help us approach intercession for our nation? What is justice? What is the role of politics? What are the limits of charity?

Read Isaiah 58. How does it address the reality explained in Genesis 3? And what does it mean for us?

Meditate on the picture “Mary consoles Eve” (next page). Where are we in the story? How has sin got a hold on us? What needs crushing in us?



## Act 3 – Israel

### Overview:

As we have previously explored, humanity was created to partner with God in extending shalom into the chaotic world (Genesis 1-2). Humanity rejected its God-given identity and calling (Genesis 3). Despite this rebellion, we see God extend grace to Adam & Eve – He clothes them and gives a promise of redemption even before they are expelled from Eden. The rest of the Genesis up to the end of Chapter 11 documents an escalation of sin and humanity's attempt to live without God. The rest of the Old Testament is in a sense, an account of how God continues to extend grace to an underserving and repeatedly seeks to find a way to fulfil His purposes for creation *through* humanity – as He originally intended.

This is the backdrop to the story of Israel. In Genesis 12-15 we see God make a covenant with Abraham.

Rich defined covenant for us as follows:

***"I will be to your as I should be, whether or not you are as you should be to me"***

God making a binding commitment to Abraham in order to bring about re-creation of the world. He makes a huge promise to Abraham and his descendants – that they will be His people – blessed and to be a blessing. They are to be a light in the darkness of the surrounding nations and display the grace and person of God to a chaotic world. As we read through the Old Testament we repeatedly see where they fail at this; in their worship of other gods, their failure to adhere to the Law and their treatment of other nations and peoples.

The story goes through many ups and downs but there is a consistent reoccurring theme of God offering a way of grace, humanity (represented here in the people of Israel) messing up and failing to keep their side of the covenant, and then God again offering grace and a way out. However close things get, whether it be God choosing to reboot humanity through Noah and wiping out everyone else or similarly with his allowing of the destruction of Israel and the exile of Judah but his saving of a remnant of his people, God always redeems humanity. This is because despite being the chief instigators of the problem of this fallen world, by his grace through Jesus, we remain his chosen agents of creation. He has covenanted to always achieve His creation purposes through us.

Despite this repeated failure on the part of God's people, He perseveres with this approach – *He remains faithful to His covenant with Abraham*. Eventually the prophets speak of one who will come to finally establish God's new way on the earth – a messiah, the Son of God. A true human who will help Israel remain faithful to the covenant. We know now that that this is achieved in and through Jesus – God incarnated. In other words, He fulfills our side of the covenant for us.

Through Jesus we see the completion of God's redemptive work and also the beginning of something new. Jesus took on the creation mandate of Adam, the vocation of Israel and fulfills all the hope and longing seen through the story of Israel. The covenant is both realised and solidified in the incarnation of Christ and we who share in both his death and resurrection are both the recipients of the promise to Abraham and those called to then live it out in to the world for the sake of others. We are not just rescued, we are rescued for a purpose and that purpose is to join Jesus in bringing all things back to God.

**Read:** Genesis 17:1-8

**Ask ourselves:**

When have we seen, often in retrospect, God's grace through our mistakes or failures? Maybe, if people are comfortable, share with the group?

Does the idea and evidence of covenant change our perspective on mission, engagement with the world and people who we struggle to think of as made in the Image of God?

In what ways do we covenant with each other, both in our small groups and in the wider church? How

**Taking it further:**

What would binding covenant commitments to one another in a community like your small group look like?

How can we encourage one another in community to be faithful to God as individuals?

What might it look like for us, the church, to "be to the city as we should be, even if it is not to us as it should be"?

## Act 4 – Jesus

### Overview:

The narrative of the Bible, and the ultimately the story of God, finds its centre in the incarnation and person Jesus. He is the both the beginning and end of all human history and the fulfillment of every promise given by God to his people. The gospels, rather than being independent accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, must be read and understood within the preceding history of the world as told in the Old Testament.

Mark roots the story of Jesus in the history of Israel, Matthew highlights Jesus' fulfillment of law and covenant, Luke shows Jesus in the story of humanity from Adam onwards, and John re-writes the creation narrative to show Jesus as its foundation. Jesus is the hinge of human and cosmological history. If we want to know what both God and humanity are, we look at Jesus.

The promises given to Abraham are both fulfilled and expanded in Jesus. All scripture can be seen as the prequel to the incredible moment of the incarnation of Christ; He fulfills the law and He keeps the covenant between God, Israel and subsequently all humankind.

Remember that there had been silence for somewhere between 600 and 800 years after the prophets stopped speaking for God. Then all of a sudden there is a moment in time that is pronounced by John the Baptist - what theologians call a "Kairos" moment. A moment in time of great significance with everlasting cosmological impact. Jesus declared "the time (*kairos*) has come, the Kingdom of God has come near".

The Messiah, the true Israelite promised by God had finally come. It is God himself, incarnated into creation and the human story. He, just as with the call of Abraham, is asked by God to leave his comfortable domain (heaven) and to enter a land not of his own in order to create a people (the church & the Kingdom). He insists on being baptized, not out of a need to be "purified" but rather because He comes to be completely human, to incarnate Himself amongst us, to invade our story with His own and redeem the mess of humanity. Only someone fully human could do that. Jesus is the sinless saviour.

Jesus' entire ministry, healings, the casting out of evil spirits, are all moments that say "I am the God who created you and I'm here to put things right". He demonstrates his authority over of the chaos and wilderness of this world and says "no more".

The story of God and humanity began in a garden. Notice then that Jesus, upon his death, defeat of sin and death, and his subsequent resurrection is found in a garden. He has rebooted humanity. God, in His grace, has become like one of us, so that we, in Him, can become like Him again, truly and fully the image of God.

**Read:** Galatians 3:1-14

*Alan Mann* writes “Jesus lives a fully authentic human existence, doing all the things he does, not because he’s God (though he is that), but because he’s a human being living out his humanity in full, uninterrupted relationship with God and empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit”.

**Ask ourselves:**

Why is it important to grasp that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, but chooses to live dependent on the Holy Spirit and within the limitations of being human? Does this change how we view His mission and our place in his story?

How does viewing Jesus as the focal point of the entire Biblical story help us with any sense of disconnection with the story of the Old Testament?

How does the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus challenge and fuel our view of, and participation in, mission?

Why is that we so often live a life that is restrained and not sold out for Jesus and the mission of God? Why is this?

In what ways can we, both as a church and in our small groups, demonstrate the same incarnational living as Jesus?

**Taking it further:**

What might it look like for you as a small group to incarnate yourselves as a part of the church into the places and people you do life with? What “rubble” needs clearing as a sign in and to the world that God’s new world is breaking in?

How can you support one another as individually you seek to be Christ in the world?

## Act 5 – Church

### Overview:

The church was born out of a ragtag, unqualified bunch of “young lads” to be the expression of the fulfilled covenant between God and humanity. We see a group of people who, filled with the Spirit, are sent out to proclaim the Kingdom come. They are sent to do the exact same things that Jesus did.

The main word for “church” throughout the New Testament is *ekklesia*. This simply means “the called out ones”; those who have responded to the revelation of who Jesus is and what he has done. A people called out of spiritual slavery and into the freedom of new creation; a people who commit to joining with God in the renewal of all things. They are the renewed Israel, the living, continuous fulfillment of the promises God gave first to Adam, then Abraham and then Israel.

**Read:** Acts 1-2

### Unpack:

Luke who wrote the gospel of Luke, also wrote the Book of Acts. He begins by saying that his gospel tells of what Jesus *began to do*. In other words, Acts is a continuation of the narrative. It tells the story of the early church.

Paul talks about the church as the new Israel. In his writings he shows that the church is a new covenant community, centred around the new covenant Jesus makes with humanity through his life, death and resurrection. The communion meal is a means of us remembering and embracing this covenant together.

The Church celebrates Pentecost because it is the moment that God brought this ragtag group of people together and said “these are who I will use!” It is also the reversal of Babel; God comes, breathes and begins to reconnect people, all groups, and languages and says all are welcome into the family - every tongue and every tribe. This moment then pushes the church out into the world, rather than settling and selfishly keeping the good news to themselves.

It is also the moment when the church is brought to life. This is an echo of the Genesis story where God breathes into Adam, bringing him to life. At Pentecost God breathes on His new creation people and they come fully alive – they are “born again”. We are given fullness of life and we can become fully human as God always intended.

Paul encourages us to “go on being filled with the Holy Spirit” (cf. Ephesians). The problem however is, that we leak and so we need to develop a continuous engagement with the Spirit. We receive new life from God, first for us, and second, so *that* we can go into the world and help bring it back to life.

When Jesus died, the temple curtain split. This wasn't because something bad had happened, it was because God no longer restricted Himself to the temple; at Pentecost He sent His Spirit to fill and dedicate a new temple – the body of Christ. We are now the dwelling place on earth of God's presence. Where we go He goes.

This is something that is both incredible and amazing, we see it in healings, miracles, supernatural break ins, but it is also present in the mundane, the making of coffee week in and week out for each other, the just listening, the every day. We are both a people of the now and the not yet, we are seated with Jesus in the heavens but we are also on this earth to be God's primary tool to bring all people back to Himself.

Therefore, to engage with the world, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to give to those in need, listen to the hurting, to bring our friends to church or share our faith is not just a command, it is a privilege, we join in the exact same mission that Jesus is on Himself.

### **Ask Ourselves:**

Paul's “second concern” is to bring communities of believers to maturity. Look at how such images as the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16), the body which grows out of the head (Christ—Ephesians 4:15) and God's field (in which they have been planted and are being watered—I Corinthians 3:5–9) vividly portray the nurture and growth of believing communities. What are these images intended to teach?

In Paul's teaching, through the death and resurrection of Jesus God has given “new life.” What is at the heart of this new life? Explain the meaning of the terms Paul uses to describe this new life: (i) righteousness, (ii) reconciliation, and (iii) adoption.

What is the dominant story in our culture today? What would it be like to “live out” that story? How is the Biblical story a distinct alternative to our culture's dominant story? What would it be like to live out the Biblical story? What would happen to the Biblical story if it is subordinated to the dominant story of our culture?

**Take it further:**

Ask one another what it would like for more of God's presence and power to spill out of us into the world around us – people, places and problems?

How can you as a small group help one another more fully embrace the requirements of the new covenant – to offer ourselves as living sacrifices? Why is it so hard to give up what the world offers in order to give to the world what Jesus offers?

Take some time to lay hands on one another and ask the Spirit to fill you with new life!

## **Act 6 – New Creation**

### **Overview:**

The church was born

### **Read:** Acts 1-2

### **Unpack:**

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