

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BIBLE CONFIDENCE AND KNOWING THE STORY



Session 2: Creation and Calling

Understanding key themes: Creation: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes the world?

Understanding key themes: Image of God: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes God's hope and purpose for human beings?

Understanding key themes: Fall: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes the problems we face in the world and ourselves?

Reading it well: How do we read the Bible faithfully?

Practical starting points: What will help me discover the original intended meaning of a text?

Understanding key themes: Creation: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes the world?



Each of us has a way of looking at the world and understanding why we are here. We may not always acknowledge (or even realise) what our 'worldview' is, but it will be framed around the answers we give to four questions:

Where am I? (What kind of world do I live in?)
Who am I? (What kind of creature am I?)
What is wrong? (What is the problem with the way the world is / I am?)
What is the solution? (What will put the world, or me, right? Where might it be headed?)

The story of the Bible gives us a worldview which addresses these four questions, and the answers to the first three are laid out in the first chapters of the Bible – Genesis 1-11.

Genesis describes why things and people exist, what is wrong, and begins to unfold God's solution.

The world is made by and continues to exist because of God.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1:1

The Bible says that the world we live in is a place created by God. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, who created the heavens and the earth."

To say that God created this world immediately

challenges the worldview of thinking we can plunder it, use up its resources and take it for granted. The world we live in exists for God.

The first verse of the Bible also introduces us to the reality of a seen and unseen world, a physical and a spiritual reality – the 'heavens and the earth', originally created to be united.

From the beginning of the Bible, creation is not worshipped – but it points to God's glory ("The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." (Psalm 19:1)) and reveals His reality: ("For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Romans 1: 20))

The world continues to exist because of God – creation is ongoing.

He did not wind it up like a big clock and leave it to run itself. He made an agreement with it.





Through Jeremiah, God said this about His relationship with the world: "If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and of David my servant." (Jeremiah 33: 23-26)

God loves His world and remains faithful to it.

God is saying that His love for Israel is as certain as his commitment to keep day and night going. The only reason there will be a sunrise tomorrow morning is because God has decreed it will be so.

Jesus celebrates God's intimate relationship with the world when He says, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. God clothes the grass of the field...." (Matthew 6: 26,30)

The world is ordered by God

"And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

God rules His creation by His law. He has designed his creation at every level to work in certain ways. There are two ways He rules. The first is directly without help from anyone - through what we call "natural law" - so he has made the planets move in certain ways without help from anyone, he makes seeds germinate, weather fronts form, animals exist without help from anyone. (Psalm 104)

The second way that God rules His creation is indirectly, through human beings. Crucially, God has written laws for both ways of ruling.



Just as there are natural laws, so too God has designed human life to exist in certain ways, and not others. He has norms for human life.

We are used to talking about God's will for my life in terms of specific events - who should I marry, what job I should have. But God has an equally specific will for every area of life.

Isaiah talks about how God has set up creational laws for good agriculture, asking, "When a farmer ploughs for planting, does he plough continually? Does he keep on breaking up and working the soil? When he has levelled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin?...His God instructs him and teaches him the right way." (Isaiah 28: 24-26)

God has created all of life to flourish in different ways. For example, if I am an artist, I can know that there is good art and bad art. God has designed art to be created in certain ways and not others. I am called to serve God by working out how art should be pursued to reveal God's creativity.

If I am a teacher, I am called to discern God's creational norms for how children should be educated. If I am a business person, it is possible for me to explore ways that my business can be run which reflect God's goodness.

However, there is a big difference between God's order of things for the natural world, and His ordering things for us. Natural laws don't have any choice but to obey God's norms.

Human beings do. We can choose to follow God's norms or not. A stone has no choice but to obey the law of gravity. But, as the second chapter of Genesis makes clear, human beings are given the choice as to whether to apply God's laws to human situations or not.



Schools, businesses, families, art all have certain structures along which they should run which are part of the reality given by God. God instituted the state and has designed it to run in certain ways and not others.

The Bible assumes that just as we should be able to work out from looking at things how the natural world works, so we should be able to work out how human affairs are made to work.

For example, you know that if you try and run a school like a business it creates problems. God did not create education to function in that way. If you try to run a business like a family it won't work. And if you try to run a family like a school you will do violence to the structure of family life God has created.

A proper understanding of God's world makes our relationship to it healthy.

"Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

For some religions the world is seen as a prison from which we must ultimately be freed. 'Carnal things' such as the human body, sex, art, sport, literature, theatre, food, dancing, parties, and playing cards are distractions from the 'spiritual'.

But Genesis tells us that this is a terrible mistake, because God called what he created good. Seven times it says in Genesis that God looked at things and said they were good, and the final time it states that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1: 31)

At the beginning of the story soil and spirit are united. There isn't somewhere else. This is God's theatre. Human beings are living body-souls. God thoroughly approves of the body.

Whereas Plato said that the body is a prison of the soul, in Genesis God does not split human beings up. He breathed his spirit into the human being's body.



This is paralleled in the description of God creating the heavens - the spiritual, and the earth - the physical, intending for them to be knitted together in one unified creation, and it is good.

William Temple said that Christianity is the most materialistic religion in the world. He didn't mean we all need more things, he meant that God loves our physical, material life. That's why Jesus could become flesh.

This understanding should help us to be unafraid to enjoy God's good gifts. It should help us not to split our lives into sacred and secular compartments.



Understanding key themes: Image of God: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes God's hope and purpose for human beings?



Being in God's image means being His representatives and knowing our primary task

"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 1:28)

Being in God's image means being made for relationship with God and each other.

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'....So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1: 26-27)

By breathing His personal spirit into human beings, God distinguishes us from other animals. Genesis describes this as meaning we are uniquely in His image.

At the heart of imaging God is being made for relationship - with God and each other. These first verses portray God as having a conversation with Himself.

From the beginning God is social - a divine community of love. Just as God is a relationship, so as human beings, part of what makes us bear His image is needing others. The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Genesis 2:18)

As we have seen, the second way in which God rules His world is indirectly, through human beings. The beginning of the Bible reveals what human beings are here to do. At the beginning of the story God's first words to human beings are to image Him by being fruitful and to "fill the earth and subdue it". (Genesis 1: 28)

God gives humans enormous power to image Him in the world - intelligence, creativity, leadership, and ingenuity - and God gives Adam and Eve a world inherent with possibilities:

Minerals wait to be mined for metal instruments; plants grow to be cut for food or herbs; animal skins can be converted into human clothes; trees to be made into furniture, houses, cities, books, musical instruments.

This is the main human task and has been called the "cultural mandate". To fill the earth, not just with babies, but with music, creativity, technology, learning, art, architecture, parks, photography.



Understanding this creational task can help us to see discipleship as not just being about personal worship and morality, but about changing and developing the world that the Lord of everything created. We will avoid thinking seeing stewardship as maintenance, keeping things ticking over until He comes again.

The task Adam and Eve got, and the role that we have inherited as a result, is one of building a civilisation which teases out of God's creation all He primed it to be able to do, to the glory of his name. We can image God just as much outside the church as within it.

As well as "filling the earth" in this way, we represent God by "ruling over" the earth. Rightly understood, this is about protecting the earth (rather than exploiting it for our own ends).

In her book, 'The Mystic way of Evangelism', Elaine Heath writes, "Creation should see in redeemed humanity the same loving care and respect that God has for his creation." What she calls "Eco-evangelism, being good news to creation in the name of Jesus, must become key in the mission of the church."

She says that the world is becoming "...increasingly mutilated (under) the unholy alliance of science, technology and industry which threaten the very future of the planet...Evangelism is not good news until it is good news for all of creation, for humanity, animals, plants, waters, and soil, for the earth that God created and called good."

Being in God's image reflects the dignity and authority of human beings

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it... He brought (the animals) to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name." (Genesis 2: 15, 19)

The creation of human beings is the climax of God's work - we are named as "very good" in the story. This underlines how to be made in His image is to grant incredible dignity to each person.

The Bible Project authors point out how in ancient times kings would claim to be God's image on earth. For the Bible to apply this title to all human beings is to say that God gives every human being this royal authority.



Psalm 8 wonders at the incredible responsibility and worth God gives us, asking, "...what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"

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You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour. You made them rulers over the works of your hands you put everything under their feet..."

(Psalm 8: 4-6)

Genesis reveals God the way God works in the world as being willing to take the risk of a genuine human-divine partnership, in which human beings are not equals with God, but are nevertheless 'under-kings'.

The story of the Bible starts and ends here - with God wanting to restore each human by being "renewed...in the image of the creator" (Colossians 3:8-13), and eventually ruling with Him once again.

Understanding key themes: Fall: What is important that we understand about how the story of the Bible describes the problems we face in the world and ourselves?



The Bible describes the root of the world's problem.

"And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.'" (Genesis 3: 22)

In 1937 HG Wells wrote, "Can we doubt that presently our race will more than realise our wildest imaginations, that it will achieve unity and peace, and that our children will live in a world made more splendid and lovely than any palace or garden that we know, going on from strength to strength in an ever-widening circle of achievement?"

Yet nine years later in 1946 he wrote this, "The cold-blooded massacres of the defenceless, the return of deliberate and organised torture, mental torment, and fear to a world from which are such things had seemed well-nigh banished - has come near to breaking my spirit altogether. Homo sapiens, as he has been pleased to call himself, is played out."

The Bible begins with a description of the original dignity and calling of human beings, but also the reality of how far we have universally "fallen" from the glory given to us. As Paul wrote, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3: 23)

The story describes this as the result of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The issue in Genesis is not about whether we should be able to distinguish between good and evil - rather, the root of our human condition is our attempt to be wise like God is wise. To define in ourselves what is good and evil, effectively becoming our own gods.

Genesis claims that human beings fall because we stop referring to God in obedience and faithfulness and instead make our own path. Yet the paradox is that apart from God, we have no way of really knowing how to flourish.

Sin in some ways always seems to be a good - no one goes for something that is ugly to them. The root of sin is to confuse what is evil with what is good, and call good what is evil.

The Bible describes how the fall affects three relationships:

With God...

"He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'...But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.'" (Genesis 3:1,9,10)

The cause but also the effect of this disobedience is the breakdown of the relationship of trusting love between human beings and God. The story portrays the serpent as suggesting that God cannot be trusted. "Did God really say...?"



As she absorbs this lie, Eve begins to make changes in her account: The Lord had said, "You may eat freely" but Eve simply reported that He said, "We may eat." Then she adds to what God had prohibited. Though the Lord had said nothing about touching the tree Eve claims that God had said, "Neither shall you touch it."

These portray humans as falling from seeing God's love and holiness, and so beginning to view God as less than trustworthy - that His way is not necessarily the best.

As a result, humans become estranged from their Creator - they hide from Him. This breakdown is not portrayed as God giving us what we deserve, but as the natural consequence of turning away from the love and holiness of our creator. Sin itself has a built-in mechanism that leads toward perishing. We die the further we get from God. Sin is literally killing ourselves.

We can sense the effects of it in the cooling of our desire to worship and obey Him. We find that we may not want to talk to God, we may only want to talk about God.

The tone of God's question, "Where are you?" is not of anger, but of pain.

With one another...

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked...(Genesis 3:7)

There is breakdown of relationship between human beings. In losing God as the centre of their identity, and having to define themselves, they become vulnerable in front of each other, and self-protective.

This results in violence, as Cain kills Abel, and in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) we see human beings losing sight of the beautiful diversity in God's creation and seeking to get rid of cultural differences. (We shall explore this more in session 5.)

Identity apart from God cannot be eternally reliable and give stability. This fall is portrayed as the cause of human society becoming deeply fragmented and analyses the root cause of conflict in the world as the result of replacing God as our highest love.

In addition, every part of human life and every good gift that God has given can now be distorted or turned away from his life-giving purposes. Technology, thought, emotion, art, sexuality, science, language, media. The scope of our fall infects everything.

With creation.

"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." (Genesis 3: 17-18)

Disobedience, according to the Bible, is the root not just of human frustration, but the frustration of all of creation - the whole creation is groaning to be liberated from its "bondage to decay". (Romans 8: 22)

Sin has drastically affected not only us but the whole of creation - going some way to explaining the presence of suffering in this world. The story of the Bible is that when human beings fell, because we are so integral to the world, everything unravelled.



Humanity's fall is linked with sickness, disease, drought, famine, spiritual oppression and environmental collapse. Human disobedience to God's offer of life has touched everything – it's most obvious in our personal lives, in our greed, self-obsession, hatred, lusts, lies etc, and in our physical and mental diseases.

Yet it also affects the material creation. We live in a culture where the term 'Act of God' has a negative connotation with legal documents and insurance companies often referring to natural disasters as 'Acts of God'.

Beneath all of this lies the assumption that God is directly responsible for natural disasters, so the final explanation for why a particular disaster happened is to be found in why God would punish whomever the victims happen to be.

It is important to note that, as revealed in Christ, God never wills suffering or disaster. Natural events such as earthquakes are not attributed to God's will, but to the groaning of a fallen world.

It is essential to note the order of the beginning of the story – human beings and God's creation do not start out as broken and sinful, but as "very good". Human beings are sinners, but remain made in the image of God. We are affected by evil, but we are not evil in ourselves.

Nothing God has made is evil *in itself* - the world is good, and remains good. Understanding the truths of creation, before the truths of the Fall, helps us to see that in its essence, in its structure the world remains good – as the story unfolds we shall see how God can thus remain faithful to it.

As the one who fully reveals the character of God, Jesus taught and demonstrated both God's complete love and compassion for His world, and also the need to acknowledge the reality of sin.

To those who were convinced of their own righteousness, He taught the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to illustrate that the truly liberated person is the one who has a good grasp of this reality. (Luke 18: 9-14)

Whereas the Pharisees in Luke 7 were offended by the idea of forgiveness, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears was commended by Him because she was honest with her sin, and profoundly knew her need of God.



The Bible describes a human and spiritual fall.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..... After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis 1:1; 3:24)

From the beginning of the story, the Bible reveals creation as containing two realms of existence – the heavens and the earth, a spiritual realm and physical realm, initially created to be united.



Just as God delegated responsibility to humans to have to dominion over the earth, God also gave responsibilities and authority to angels.



Like human beings, spiritual beings too have freedom – to choose to obey or disobey. But a mysterious glimpse into the spiritual structures of reality reveals that they, like us, fell from God's rule.

There is a consistent picture throughout Scripture that, just as human beings can choose to disobey God, so too have spiritual 'principalities and powers'. The fallenness of this unseen realm of existence has led to conflict, and to Jesus teaching us to pray, "Deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13)

Satan, who was the most powerful of the angels— with the greatest amount of responsibility— represents this best (indeed, the Bible recognises him as "the god of this age" 2 Cor. 4:4, "the power of the air" Eph. 2:2, "the ruler of this world" John 12:31).

This understanding is foundational in the whole story of the Bible and Jesus' ministry. Paul talks about us being transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Jesus said, "The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy. I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

As we look ahead, Paul makes it clear that Jesus' death on the cross dealt a death blow to Satan and his demonic forces which have had the world under siege. "When you were dead in your sins ...God made you alive with Christ...And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2: 13-15)

But in our lived experience the spiritual effects of the Fall have yet to be cleared up completely. The New Testament is clear on this point: creation itself still groans for the restoration of the children of God to their proper place so that creation itself will be set free from bondage, decay and violence (Rom. 8:19--23; Mark 4:39; Luke 13:4--16).

This is important because for the first 300+ years of Christian faith violence, evil, even sickness and so called "natural" disasters or "Acts of God" were never understood as originating from God. They did not "happen for a reason". They are the result of the corruption of creation, not the Creator.



Reading it well: How do we read the Bible faithfully?



Why did the religious groups of Jesus' time – Pharisees, Sadducees or Essenes – disagree about some aspects the Torah means, even though they had the same text? Why do Christians have different understandings of what the Bible means?

It is impossible for us to read anything without *interpreting* it. Two things stand in our way when we seek to have a perfect understanding of any text:

We all have incomplete knowledge of the background and intention behind the original words or story.

We all wear the 'glasses' of own perspectives, shaped by our experiences, which no one else shares. (Sometimes these perspectives may help us discover new insights, but sometimes they may get in the way).

A book that was written over 1500 years by multiple authors can be doubly hard to interpret.

To read the Bible well it is therefore important that we seek to understand the original meaning as best we can, and also become aware of how other perspectives – including our own - can influence that interpretation (we will focus on this in session 4).

Particularly when we are teaching others, being sure we are trying to draw out the original meaning as much as possible (known as *exegesis*) as opposed to having our own ideas and trying to use the Bible to justify them (*eisegesis*) is vital in reading it well.

Some of these questions may help us to understand the original purpose and meaning:

How can I read this prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to guide me?

Who wrote it and to whom? (Was it intended for all people in all times i.e. the record of Jesus written by eyewitnesses or for a particular situation i.e. food laws in Leviticus?)

Why did they write it and what did they intend it to do? (What kind of writing is it? i.e. does the fact that Genesis 1 is structured like a poem for worship help us understand its purpose better?)

How does the particular passage relate to what is written before and after it? (i.e. sometimes paying attention to how a parable is introduced can help us focus on its main meaning: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." (Luke 18:1))

How does this passage work alongside other passages? (i.e. How might we harmonise Luke 14:26, which tells us we must hate our parents, spouses, children and even ourselves if we are to be Christ's disciple and Ephesians 6:2, which tells us to honour our parents?)

How does the whole Bible story help us to understand this passage? (i.e. how does our understanding of Abraham help us to interpret the writing about covenant in the New Testament?)

How might we see the meaning of this passage through Jesus? (i.e. how do we make sure we read the accounts of warfare in the Old Testament in the light of His self-sacrificial love?)

In addition, these two questions are often helpful, and can be illustrated well by looking at how we might better understand the creation stories in Genesis.



What was going on at the time that is relevant?

(What historical events or cultural background might help us understand it better? What does archaeology reveal about the place involved?) For example, knowing that other cultures had their own creation stories, that the biblical authors who wrote Genesis would have known about, can open up some exciting possibilities in appreciating the meaning of Genesis.

Indeed, the writers used aspects of these stories, but in a way that contrasts with these other myths.

At the time Genesis 1 was written, while the Israelites were in Babylon, people worshipped many gods, including the sun and moon. Genesis emphasises that there is one God and calls the sun and moon “lesser lights” (1:16), in other words, not to be worshipped.

During this period a Babylonian myth called the *Enuma Elish* portrayed creation as the fallout of a battle between two gods, and human beings, who are created from the blood of a slain god, as the slaves of the gods.

We can understand Genesis 1 better when we see it in contrast to this – rather than the world being created from a battle, it is created as “good”. Rather than humans being slaves, they are 'under-kings', made in God's image. The people who originally read this would have been slaves in Babylon – to read that God has ordered the world, and made them to be free and in His image would have inspired hope in the face of despair. Genesis 1 is a liberating story.

Are there meanings of particular words we need to pay attention to?

This final question can be illustrated by looking at the meaning of how we understand human “dominion” in Genesis, and how important a good understanding of individual words can be.

In 1967, a professor named Lynn White wrote an article in Science magazine called 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis'. In a nutshell he said that the real problem...the real danger to the environment...actually comes from the Christian faith. He went back to Genesis 1:28 and human dominion to rule over the earth. White said Christianity created this idea that nature is not sacred, it is just disposable, and that in the Bible human beings are not really a part of nature, they are above it, so nature exists just kind of as a thing for people to use and exploit.

He called this selfish anthropocentrism and that this is what characterises Christianity. Even today a lot of environmental activists are highly suspicious of Christianity. So understanding the intended meaning of the word dominion (or 'rule over') is crucial in reading the passage well.

The writers of *The Drama of Scripture* put it this way: “...it is incorrect to read dominion as legitimising a ruthless mastery over nature and exploitation of it. In God's own creative work, He acts for the good of what he has made and not for his own selfish pleasure...Over this good creation, God calls the human 'ruler' to serve as steward under-sovereign, to embody God's own care for, and protection of, His good creation in his own sovereign rule over the earth.

"It is impossible to read this as suggesting that humans are free to do what they like with God's workmanship. ...A better way of expressing the concept of 'dominion' over creation may be to say that we are God's royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God's creation so that the whole of it may celebrate His glory."

When Stuart Pimm, a Professor of Conservation Ecology, buys land in Brazil to protect a species of primates called the golden lion tamarin on the verge of extinction that is not something apart from being a disciple, that is central to being a disciple. He was interviewed by the New York Times about his work, and at the end of the interview they asked him, are you religious?

He replied, "I'm actually a believing Christian and Christians have an obligation to care for the planet because it was made by God and does not actually belong to us. So we cannot simply fail to care for oceans, or forests, or creatures. That would be to fail to fulfil our obligations to God."



Practical starting points: What will help me discover the original intended meaning of a text?



There are many resources available seeking to help us find answers to the questions we might want to ask when trying to find the intended meaning of a text.

[The Bible Project](#) provides excellent overviews of key themes and each of the books of the Bible.

[Study Bibles](#) have useful maps and introductory material for each biblical book, as well as comments on individual verses.

Bible Commentaries are written to provide detailed background, summarize their key points, and help us to apply passages well. There are commentaries for each book or one volume books on the whole Bible. There are some free New Testament ones online [here](#).

[The Lion Handbook to the Bible](#) has proved popular and immensely helpful over several decades and the short commentaries on each book by Tom Wright, published by SPCK have proved very helpful.

[A Bible Dictionary](#) gives short articles on biblical themes arranged in alphabetical order. [Nave's Topical Reference](#) offers a similar resource.

A Concordance cross-references individual words, showing where else the author used particular word, and the meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek.

Many of the tools listed above can be found on the Internet. www.biblegateway.com is a reliable resource.

