

Epic

The Storyline of the Bible

James L. Nicodem

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GENESIS

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Redemption Prompted

I NEED TO SEE the big picture—especially when I’m trying to figure out travel directions. If I am about to drive through New York City, for example, the two- by three-inch GPS picture on my iPhone of the immediate vicinity will not suffice. I want an AAA road map of the entire city at a glance—the kind that opens up to three feet wide and can never be refolded the right way.

God has given us a road map for our lives. It’s called the Bible. God’s Holy Word. The Bible is the best place to turn for direction for our lives. But we need to have a sense of the Bible’s big picture in order to understand its individual parts. So, how are we going to get a sense of that big picture? We won’t find it summarized in a couple of paragraphs on the back cover of our Bible, right above a picture of the book’s author. (God won’t hold still while His photo is taken.)

No, the Bible is not like other books. In fact, the Bible is not “a” book. It’s actually a compilation of sixty-six books in

one. Sixty-six books that were written over a period of 1,500 years, penned by forty different authors. And those forty different authors lived in ten different countries, worked in more than twenty different occupations (including king, shepherd, general, tax collector, fisherman, and doctor), and wrote in three different languages (Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic).

What are our chances of ever being able to get a sense of the Bible's big picture, the Bible's *storyline*? And speaking of the Bible's storyline, does it even *have* a clear storyline? After all, the Bible mentions, by name, 2,930 different characters. Is it really possible that all these people belong to the same drama, that they're part of the same plot?

Yes, the Bible has a storyline: a single, overarching, comprehensive storyline. A storyline that amazingly ties the whole book together, from Genesis to Revelation. And once we grasp that storyline, we'll be able to make sense of the Bible's individual parts. We'll be able to use God's road map to gain direction for our lives.

But before we dive into the Bible's opening book of Genesis, let me say a word about the general theme of the Bible's storyline. We can capture this general theme in one word, *redemption*. Look up *redemption* in the dictionary, and one of the first definitions you'll see is *deliverance* or *rescue*.

The Rescue

The Bible is a rescue story. It begins with a crisis. There are people in grave danger. Who will save them? A lot of good stories begin this way. This is what immediately grabs our attention. This is what hooks us.

If you were ever a fan of the blockbuster TV series *24*, you know what I'm talking about. Each season the show began with an emergency. Lives were at stake. There was a plot in motion to assassinate the president, or suicide bombers were on the loose, or a nuclear bomb was about to be detonated, or a deadly virus was about to be released. These situations called for the rescue efforts of super-agent Jack Bauer.

Now, not every story that we read or watch begins with that much of an adrenalin rush. But a lot of good stories *do* begin with people in dire straits. And those dire straits prompt a rescue effort.

The Bible is no exception to this pattern. In fact the Bible opens with the mother of all crises. A crisis so big that it prompts the greatest rescue effort in the history of humanity. That rescue effort—*redemption*—is the theme of the Bible's storyline. After the description in Genesis 1 of an awesome God creating earth and its inhabitants, Genesis 2–3 tells us about the crisis that prompted the rescue operation. I encourage you to grab your Bible and follow along as I identify five stages to: *Redemption Prompted*.

The Command

In the first chapter of Genesis, the opening pages of the Bible, God creates the world and everything in it. This includes the original human couple, Adam and Eve. Mister and missus are then placed in a virtual paradise, called the garden of Eden. We pick up the story in Genesis 2:15–17: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 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 of it you will surely die.’”

This command in Genesis 2:17 immediately raises a couple of objections in the minds of some readers. First off, it seems so silly, so arbitrary: *Don't eat from this tree!* C'mon. That's the best that God could come up with? I mean, this is the very first prohibition that we come across in the Bible. We expect something significant, right?

Hebrew scholars tell us that it's worded exactly like some of the famous Ten Commandments. You remember the Big Ten? They include, “You shall have no other gods before me. . . . You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:3, 13–14).

But . . . *You shall not eat from this tree?* In the words of an old *Sesame Street* jingle: “One of these things is not like the others.” Is this really God's best shot for the Bible's opening prohi-

bition? How random! If God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from that tree, why did He put the tree in the garden of Eden to begin with? Was He deliberately trying to trip them up?

May I suggest that objecting to God's command along these lines reveals a rebellious streak in our hearts? It reveals a resistance to the notion that God is *God*. As God, He has the right to command us to do whatever He pleases. If some of God's commands seem silly or arbitrary to us, the problem is not with *God*; it's with *us*.

Let me illustrate what I'm saying here. Last summer, I was looking for a place to take my family on vacation, and so I emailed a friend of mine who lives on Cape Cod. I asked him if he knew of any inexpensive rental cottages on the Cape. Preferably something near the ocean. My friend is a retired banker, a wealthy man. He emailed me back, saying: "My wife and I have a vacation house up in Maine. Why don't we go there for a week, and you and your family can have our house on the Cape?" That sounded reasonable to me.

When we got there, we realized it was a really sweet deal. Their house is massive. It has a beautiful swimming pool, a private theatre, and a gorgeous view of the ocean. Soon after we arrived we spotted a piece of paper on the kitchen counter, explaining where we could find everything. And in the middle of all this information, my friend had given us a directive: "Please water the house plants while you are here."

My immediate thought was: *What a stupid directive! Doesn't he know we're on vacation? With all his money, he could've hired somebody to do the watering.* So we just let the house plants wither and die.

Of course we didn't! It would have been foolish and ungrateful to defy my friend's instructions.

And yet, when it comes to *God's* commands, we're constantly pushing back. It's as if we reserve the right to determine which commands deserve our obedience and which commands are worthy of disdain.

A second objection that people have, when they read the "Don't eat from this tree" prohibition in Genesis 2:17, is that the penalty seems overly severe. What does our Bible say would happen to Adam and Eve if they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? They would *surely die*.

The death sentence? Are you kidding me? For eating an apple? (Actually, the Bible never says that this was an apple tree. That's just how artists have depicted it.)

What's the deal with the death sentence? It's really quite simple to explain. For the first two chapters of Genesis, the Bible has been referring to God as the source of all life. He brought the world into existence, creating stars and oceans and forests and wild animals. And when He created Adam, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

If God is the source of Adam's *life* (and of ours), what would be the natural consequence of unplugging from God by rejecting His commands? Death. Isn't that what happens when you're vacuuming your house and the plug pulls out? The vacuum dies, right? Well, people who unplug from God—the source of life—die.

The Con Job

The main characters in this drama now begin to distort God's original command. As you read Genesis 3:1–6, see if you can detect the truth-twisting that's going on:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was

good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Who is the serpent in this story? Satan. Now, the fact is Genesis 3 doesn't tell us who the serpent is. But the last book of the Bible identifies the serpent for us (Revelation 12:9): "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray."

So the serpent who approaches Eve in Genesis 3 is indeed Satan—God's archenemy! But please note in verse 1 that God *made* Satan.

It's important for us to understand that even though God and Satan have been engaged in a cosmic battle of good

SATAN IS *NOT* God's equal. God is the Creator of all things, so Satan is a created being.

vs. evil since the beginning of time, Satan is *not* God's equal. Satan is *not* God's exact polar opposite. God is the Creator of all things. Satan is a created being. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Satan is none of those things.

And because Satan lacks God's power, he must fight his battles using trickery and deceit. The Genesis account refers to him as *more crafty* than any of God's other creatures. Just look at the first words out of Satan's mouth to Eve: "Did God

really say . . . ?” (v. 1) There’s something subtly sinister about this question. Satan’s use of the word *really* drips with sarcasm. Can you detect his *you’ve-got-to-be-kidding-me* attitude? Although God has just given Adam and Eve a fairly straightforward command, Satan is about to twist and distort that command so as to get them to disobey it.

Why? Because, if Adam and Eve disobey the command, they unplug from the source of life. They die. Satan is out to destroy the pinnacle of God’s creation. And he uses trickery—a con job—to accomplish his goal.

Satan’s Three Deceits

Let me note three strategies with which Satan deceitfully counters God’s original prohibition (strategies that he’s still using on us today).

The first is *exaggeration*. His first deceit is a misleading question: “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” Is Satan accurately quoting God? No. There was only *one* tree that God said not to eat from. So why is Satan exaggerating God’s Word? To make God’s command look severe, overly demanding, unreasonable, ridiculous.

Once Satan has us believing that God’s commands are severe, overly demanding, unreasonable, or ridiculous, we feel like we have the right to disobey them. Don’t we? Like when we drive 45 mph in a 30 mph zone because it’s *so stupid* to

drive the speed limit on that wide-open stretch of road. Like when we come in at midnight (if we're high school age), even though our parents have told us that curfew is 11 p.m., because it's *so lame* to go home by 11 p.m. When we exaggerate God's commands, we make them easier to dismiss, because they're so over-the-top.

Look at how Eve quickly picks up on Satan's bad habit of exaggerating God's Word. She starts to do it herself. In the middle of verse 2, Eve says (my summary): "It's only the tree in the middle of the garden that we're not to eat from—and we're not supposed to touch it either, or we'll die." Not supposed to *touch* it? When did God say not to *touch* that tree? He didn't. Now Eve is exaggerating.

A second clever strategy that Satan uses to counter God's command is flat out *denial of consequences*. In verse 4, Satan promises Eve: "You will not surely die." Satan's denial of the death sentence that God had attached to His command (Genesis 2:17) is even stronger in the original Hebrew. Satan actually begins his sentence with the word *not*. His denial is literally: "NOT—you will surely die!"

Isn't it interesting that the very first doctrine Satan ever contradicts is the doctrine of divine judgment? "God doesn't punish sin. Disobedience to God doesn't unplug you from the source of life. There's no such thing as spiritual or eternal death." People are still buying this lie today. We all buy it to

some extent. We convince ourselves that God will shrug His shoulders at our sin. We don't really expect to pay for sin in any significant way.

A third strategy Satan uses to counter God's command is the promise that *disobedience will bring tremendous satisfaction*.

That deceit remains

today a great weapon in Satan's arsenal.

He guarantees Eve that the forbidden fruit will make her

SATAN IS IN the business of dressing up evil and trying to pass it off to us as something wonderful.

“like God, knowing good and evil” (v. 5). That sales pitch was actually half-true. Eve would know good and evil if she ate the fruit. But not like God.

God knows evil like a cancer doctor knows cancer. But Eve would know evil like a cancer victim knows cancer. Do you see the difference? If Eve ate the fruit, she would know evil from personal experience. That wouldn't be a good thing, even though Satan tried to dress it up as if it would be tremendously satisfying.

Satan is still in the business of dressing up evil and trying to pass it off to us as something wonderful. “You'd feel much better if you got some revenge.” “You'd really enjoy a shopping spree.” “You'd laugh yourself silly over this raunchy movie.” “You'd be a lot happier if you got out of your difficult

marriage.” “You’d loosen up with a few more beers.”

Eve fell for Satan’s con job. She ate from the tree that God had said not to eat from. So did her husband Adam. And we’ve been falling for Satan’s con job ever since.

The Cover-Up

What happened after Eve and then Adam bit into the fruit? According to Genesis 3:7–13:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of 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.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me— she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Foundation

The Reliability of the Bible

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DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION

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God's Autobiography

CITY RESIDENTS FOUND LITTLE comfort as they sweltered under the summer sun on August 1, 1885. But relief was on the way. Six and one-half inches of torrential rain fell on Chicago over the next twenty-four hours.

Unfortunately, this produced major flooding. Sewage from the city's 750,000 residents and runoff from the infamous stockyards washed into the Chicago River. The polluted water was then carried out into Lake Michigan. According to an exaggerated story in the *Chicago Tribune* at the time, this toxic brew was then sucked up by the intake system that provided the city with its drinking water.¹

The *Tribune's* story was very alarming—even if it was suspect. Chicagoans started talking about the possible outbreak of cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and other waterborne diseases. Somebody suggested, although nobody remembers *who* said it, that people were dying from these diseases.

It was eventually claimed that one out of eight Chicagoans had succumbed to the epidemic. This part of the story

was repeated again and again over the following years, without any supporting evidence. Each successive retelling merely parroted the previous accounts.² Today those events are known as the Chicago epidemic of 1885.

In 1956, Chicago's water sanitation department actually distributed an official pamphlet describing the 1885 epidemic. It was politically motivated; the sanitation department wanted public support for projects that would upgrade Chicago's water purification system.³ But sanitation officials knew the voters were aware of the many improvements that had already been made in this regard (such as filtration and chlorination systems), which now ensured safe drinking water. So in order to get their money, they decided to put a little scare into the local population. They printed a pamphlet that retold the story of the 1885 epidemic.

Fast-forward to recent times. In 2000 Libby Hill wrote *The Chicago River*, a history of the river's impact on the city and surrounding environs. The Northern Illinois University professor included a section on the 1885 epidemic. In her research for the book, she couldn't find any evidence for the story of a massive epidemic. In fact, Hill discovered that the death rate for 1885 was actually *lower* than for previous years. That got her thinking: If one out of eight people had died, as the epidemic story claimed, there would've been dead bodies everywhere (almost 94,000 of them)! But there weren't. And

the city would've come to a grinding halt. But it hadn't.⁴

Well, it turns out that the Chicago epidemic of 1885 was a tall tale. Even the environmentalist group Friends of the Chicago River was forced to take the story off its website.⁵

Could this account serve as a metaphor for how the Bible came into existence? Is the Bible nothing more than a collection of tall tales? Have the Bible's stories been exaggerated from the beginning? Have they been stretched so that the storytellers could advance their own agenda? Has contemporary research now proven these stories to be fabrications?

Bottom line: Is the Bible reliable?

In this chapter, I will begin to answer this question (in the affirmative, of course) by making the case that the Bible has come to us from a trustworthy God. This book is, amazingly, *God's Autobiography*. And that means that it is marked by three unique, reliability-affirming characteristics—it is supernatural, inerrant, and authoritative.

A Supernatural Book

A key text for understanding the Bible's authorship is 2 Timothy 3:16. This is a verse worth memorizing. For now, I just want to roll out its opening phrase: "All Scripture is God-breathed . . ." What does the expression *God-breathed* mean? In the old King James Version of the Bible, the word *inspired* was used instead of *God-breathed*. Why didn't the translators of our

contemporary New International Version stick with *inspired*?

The NIV translators most likely dropped the word *inspired* because it wouldn't communicate to a contemporary audience what the apostle Paul meant to say when he wrote 2 Timothy 3:16. When we use the word *inspired*, we're usually referring to a person who's been emotionally or creatively moved to do something. I might say, for example: "I was inspired to clean the garage this past week." (Believe me, it would take inspiration!)

Or to use a classier example, we might say that George Frideric Handel was inspired when he composed his famous oratorio, *Messiah*. Here's a guy who wrote 260 pages of music for a complete orchestra in just twenty-four days. He didn't leave his room the entire time. He barely touched his food.⁶ And when *Messiah* was first performed in 1742, it was so majestic that the King of England rose to his feet when the choir began to sing the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Yes, Handel was inspired. He was creatively moved.

But that's *not* what the apostle Paul meant to say about Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16. The best English translation of Paul's original Greek expression is, in fact, exactly what we have in the NIV: "All Scripture is God-breathed." So, when theologians today use the old KJV word *inspired* to refer to the Bible, this is what they're talking about: the God-breathed nature of the book.

But what exactly is it about the Bible that is inspired or God-breathed? There are two mistaken notions with regard to inspiration. Some people assume that this must be a reference to the Bible's *writers*. Men like Moses and King David and the apostle Paul, who penned various books of the Bible, were inspired, right? Didn't God breathe into them some general ideas, after which they sat down and wrote out, as best they could, their particular portions of the Bible? No, that would be the first wrong notion.

The trouble with this view of inspiration is that it leaves open the possibility that these human writers might not have gotten things right. What if they misunderstood what God breathed into them to say? Or what if they didn't choose the best words to communicate these general God-given impressions to us? No, it's not enough that the *writers* themselves were inspired.

A second mistaken notion is to assume that inspiration refers to the Bible's *readers*. When you pick up the Bible and read it, God speaks to you. You, as it were, become inspired. Make sense? Some people who hold this view have gone so far as to say: "The Bible is the Word of God when it becomes the Word of God to you." Huh? What if that doesn't happen? What if you read the Bible and it doesn't feel like God is speaking to you? Is the Bible only inspired when it connects with you? Is it only inspired when you, as the *reader*, are inspired?

No. Inspiration is not about the Bible's *writers* and it's not about the Bible's *readers*. It's about the Bible's *words*. Go back to the opening phrase of 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed." What is "God-breathed"? (Sorry to ask the obvious.) *Scripture is*. The Greek word for Scripture is *graphe*, and it means, literally, *writing*. So the writing itself, the very words that appear in print, is what God inspired. That's why theologians, when they speak of inspiration today, will often add the adjective *verbal* in front of it. "*Verbal* inspiration" clarifies the fact that God breathed out the actual words of the Bible.

WHAT GOD wanted to say got said, exactly as God wanted it said.

Why is this so important to note? Because it assures us that what God wanted to say got said, exactly as God wanted it said. Does this mean that the human writers (Moses, David, Paul, and so on) were simply secretaries, stenographers to whom God dictated His Word? Absolutely not. If you read the Bible, which is a compilation of sixty-six books, you'll quickly discover that each book reflects the vocabulary, the culture, the historical setting, and the personality of its human author.

For instance, compare Moses' laws with David's psalms, or with Paul's letters, or with Solomon's proverbs, or with Zechariah's prophecy, or with Matthew's biography of Jesus,

or with Luke's history of the early church. There's a lot of variety among the books by those seven writers. That variety reflects the differences among the human authors. God didn't dictate His Word to them in some uniform fashion. However, God *did* ensure that what He wanted to say got said, exactly as He wanted it said. "All Scripture"—the writing itself, the very words that appear in print—"is God-breathed."

That makes the Bible a unique book. It's unlike any other book you can pick up at Barnes & Noble, or Amazon.com, or the public library. The Bible is *God's* Word. And because it is the Word of a supernatural God, it must be a supernatural book.

I know that sounds like an outrageous claim, especially if you are a skeptic as you read this. You probably think that I'm pretty gullible to believe that the Bible is God-breathed just because 2 Timothy 3:16 says that it's God-breathed. Well, I assure you that I have just as much of an aversion to being caught gullible as you do. I am very wary about being taken for a ride down fantasy lane.

I remember, years ago when I was a college student, taking a walk on a starry night with this good-looking girl. She began to point out constellations to me in the brightly lit sky. The Big Dipper was easy to spot. So was Orion's Belt. But as we continued to stroll, she began identifying starry configurations that I had never heard of. And when she'd ask me, "Do

you see such-and-such?” I would nod my head and say uh-huh, even though I couldn’t quite make out the cluster of stars that

she was describing. Constellation after constellation, my astronomy lesson continued. Wherever my date pointed, I would gaze and say: “Wow! That’s cool!!”

About twenty minutes into the walk, an awful thought popped into my head: *What if she’s making all this up?* What if she’s playing a practical joke on me to see how gullible I am? What if I’ve been nodding my head and oohing and aahing over constellations that don’t exist? What if she goes back to her dorm and tells her roommate: “You wouldn’t believe the loser I suckered tonight!”

Nobody likes to be thought of as gullible . . . naïve . . . clueless . . . simpleminded. And that’s why, in today’s culture, it’s a bit intimidating to express a belief in the Bible as God’s Word; to claim that it’s a *supernatural* book. No Western-civilized, college-educated, self-respecting man or woman believes that *God* authored the Bible. C’mon! Why should anybody swallow the 2 Timothy 3:16 statement that the Bible is God-breathed?

BECAUSE IT is the Word of a supernatural God, the Bible must be a supernatural book.

Evidence for a Supernatural Book

Very briefly, let me give you some hard evidence that points to the *supernatural* nature of the Bible. None of these proofs is conclusive in itself. But when you take them all together, they make a pretty strong case that this book has been authored by God.

Historical accuracy. When it comes to its many references to people, places, and events, the Bible is an amazingly accurate book. So say archaeologists. I'll talk more about this in the next chapter when I cover how it was determined which books to include in the Bible, because historical accuracy was a critical test that had to be passed. But let me note Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts as a quick example of the Bible getting its facts straight. Christian author and apologist Lee Strobel cites a highly esteemed archaeologist in his book *The Case for Christ*, who examined every one of Luke's references to thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands. And he didn't find a single mistake!⁷

Fulfilled prophecy. Did you know that prophecy is fairly rare in the writings of most religions? In all the works of Buddha and Confucius there is not a single example of predictive prophecy. In the entire Quran, written by Muhammad, there's only *one* prophecy—and it's pretty general.

By way of contrast, the Bible's Old Testament alone contains over two thousand predictive prophecies. These are not

vague predictions, like the kind you'd find in a fortune cookie. Many of them are very specific.

Consider just a few of the prophecies made about Jesus Christ, hundreds of years before His birth. (I refer to these prophecies, as well, in chapter 3 of *Epic* and show how they contribute to the Bible's overall storyline.) Daniel foretold the exact time of Jesus' appearing (Daniel 9:24). Micah predicted that Jesus would be born in the small village of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would enter Jerusalem triumphantly on the back of a colt, but later be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 9:9; 11:12–13). Isaiah described how Jesus would be put to death alongside criminals, and yet be buried in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9). Prophecies like these surely evidence the Bible's supernatural character.

Indomitable durability. Time and again throughout history, the enemies of Christianity have attempted to undermine or even stamp out the Bible. But such efforts, though sustained, have all proven unsuccessful. My favorite anecdote in this regard concerns eighteenth-century French philosopher and skeptic Voltaire. Voltaire was a caustic critic of the Bible. He described it as a book of fairy tales that would cease to exist within a generation or two of his lifetime. It turns out that Mr. Voltaire wasn't much of a prophet. After his death, his house was purchased by a printing business that published

copies of—would you believe—the Bible! Got to love God's sense of humor.

Overall consistency. Keep in mind that the Bible is actually sixty-six books in one. And yet its authors—who represent a wide variety of vocations, come from three different continents, and write over a period of fifteen hundred years—speak with remarkable harmony about *one* central theme. Imagine such a diverse collection of writers today agreeing on any topic, whether it be medicine or economics or sports or you name it.

Miraculous depictions. If the Bible is God-breathed, if it's a supernatural book, wouldn't we expect it to contain stories of God's miraculous interventions in our world? And yet, ironically, this is the very thing that skeptics won't tolerate about the Bible. Thomas Jefferson is a case in point. Are you familiar with Jefferson's New Testament? Jefferson was a true child of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on scientific investigation. If something couldn't be studied or tested in the laboratory, ol' Tom wouldn't believe it. So one day he got out his X-ACTO knife and cut out all the passages in the Gospels that describe Jesus' miracles.

**A REASONABLE case
can be made for the
Bible being God-
breathed based on its
historical accuracy,
fulfilled prophecy . . .
and transformed lives.**

Context

How to Understand the Bible

James L. Nicodem

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The Historical Setting

I WAS A BIBLICAL STUDIES major in college. One of my favorite professors taught me Old Testament and Hebrew. He was a very dignified, articulate, God-fearing man. He kind of reminded me of an ancient prophet. One Sunday I stopped by his house to drop something off and his wife was getting their six-year-old son, Scotty, ready for church in another room.

In the middle of my conversation with this professor, we heard Scotty scream at the top of his lungs: “I don’t want to go to church! You can’t make me go to church! I HATE CHURCH!!” The face of my very dignified, articulate, God-fearing professor turned beet-red with embarrassment. But he very quietly said to me: “You must understand the *context* of that outburst. You see, Scotty has just been pulled from the sandbox.”

Ahhh! “You must understand the context.” That also happens to be the most important rule for interpreting the Bible. *You must understand the context.* Have you ever heard a skeptic complain, “Oh, people can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say”? That skeptic is absolutely right. People *can*

make the Bible say whatever they want it to say—if they take Bible verses out of context. But that’s a violation of the number one ground rule for interpreting the Bible.

There are ground rules for interpreting the Bible? Yes, there are ground rules for interpreting *any* piece of serious writing, whether it’s the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays, Robert Frost’s poems, or Jane Austen’s novels. Interpreting great literature requires ground rules. The ground rules for interpreting the Bible are called *hermeneutics*.

Herman who? *Hermeneutics* is a Greek word. If you know your Greek mythology, you probably recall that Hermes was the messenger god. He was responsible for conveying information from the gods to humans. So, hermeneutics refers to the ground rules that must be followed in order to ensure that the Word of God, the Bible, is accurately understood by us.

Context is really just a short course in hermeneutics. No matter what your current level of Bible understanding, you need hermeneutics. If you’re not yet a Bible reader because you’re put off by a book that’s set in cultures so vastly different from your own, you need hermeneutics. If you regularly read the Bible but come across passages that leave you asking, “What in the world does this mean?” you need hermeneutics. If you want to hear God speak to you through the Bible but you’re not always certain if you’re reading His thoughts *out* of the text or your own thoughts *into* the text (you see the

difference?), you need hermeneutics. If you belong to a Bible study group in which there are occasionally as many interpretations of a passage as there are participants around the table, you need hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics are the basic ground rules for interpreting the Bible. And all of the ground rules are founded on one important principle: *You must understand the context*. There are four kinds of context that we'll be considering in this section, the first of which is the Bible's historical setting. If we want to interpret the Bible correctly, we have to pay attention to the historical background of every passage we turn to. How do we do that? Let me spell it out in the form of three directives.

Pursue the Objective Facts

Some time ago, I read a book review of a new biography on the life of Ronald Reagan. According to the reviewer this biography contains a lot of fabricated information; the author has made up details about Ronald Reagan's life that are not completely true. However, the reviewer quickly added, the book tells a really good story and is well worth reading. I thought: *Huh? Who wants to read a biography that's not grounded on historical facts?*

Did you know that Christianity is unique among the world's religions in that it is grounded on historical facts? These facts are objective and verifiable. Take away the facts

and the Christian faith crumbles. What *are* the facts? Well, according to the Bible's record, Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, came to earth as a human being. He did miracles that provided evidence of His deity. Then He died on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins. And three days later He rose from the dead, proving that His sacrifice was effective and that He has the power to give people new and eternal life.

Take away these objective facts and there's not much left of the Christian faith. But that's not true of other world religions. Buddhism, for example, doesn't depend upon the historicity of its founder. It doesn't revolve around the life of *The Buddha*, Siddhartha Gautama, in 500 BC. It revolves around a set of teachings referred to as the Eightfold Path that will lead you to nirvana.

The same is true of Hinduism. Objective facts about Vishnu aren't important. Religious ideas are what hold Hinduism together. The same is true of Islam. Even though we know a lot about the actual life of Muhammad, Islam isn't built on the historical events of Muhammad's life. It's built on the Five Pillars of Faith as revealed in the Quran.

Christianity is the only major world religion that stakes its existence on objective facts. The apostle Paul drove home this point when he summarized the basic content of his teaching in the following verses:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:1–6)

What does the apostle Paul say is the core of the Christian faith that he preaches? Christianity is grounded on certain objective facts: that Jesus died for our sins and was buried; that He rose again on the third day; and that scores of eyewitnesses actually saw all this! Take away those historical events and you lose the gospel, the good news of the faith. Take away those objective facts and “you [Christians] have believed in vain” (v. 2).

I heard about a very liberal theologian who was asked the question, “What if it could be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus did *not* rise from the dead? What if Jesus’

bones were discovered—verifiably—in a first-century tomb?” His reply: “That wouldn’t make any difference to *my* faith. I would still believe that the spirit of Jesus is alive today.”

What do you think about that theologian’s response? I’ll tell you what the apostle Paul would think about it. If we drop down to verse 14 of the passage we just read (1 Corinthians 15), Paul says: “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Genuine Christianity rests on objective facts.

Now, why am I making such a big deal about this point? What does this have to do with how we approach the task of understanding the Bible? Here’s the reason for the big deal. The Bible’s message is wrapped up in objective facts. If we want to interpret that message correctly, then we need to understand those objective facts. We need to understand the historical setting of whatever Bible passage we’re looking at.

Are you following me? The Bible is *not* a Magic 8 Ball. Remember those? (Mattel, the toymaker, is still making them.) They were originally designed back in 1950 by a guy whose mother was a psychic. You ask the liquid-filled Magic 8 Ball a yes-or-no question, then you turn it upside down and an answer floats to the surface. The answer may be: *Outlook good*; or *Don’t count on it*; or *Reply hazy, try again*.

Some people do this with the Bible. They open it to a random passage, hoping that it will speak directly to their lives,

without any consideration of the historical facts behind that passage. If they open, for example, to the New Testament epistle of Colossians, they don't care *who* the Colossians were or *why* the apostle Paul was writing this letter to them. They just want a Magic 8 Ball message for *their* lives. If they open to the Old Testament book of Esther, they don't care *when* this story took place or *what* was going on in Esther's life at the time. They just want to know: What is this passage saying to *me*?

SOME PEOPLE open the Bible to a random passage, hoping it will speak directly. They just want a Magic 8 Ball message for *their* lives.

R.C. Sproul, a well-known theologian and author, tells an amusing story from his days of teaching at a Christian college.¹ One of his female students, a senior, found herself approaching graduation with no man in her life. Many of her friends had serious boyfriends or even fiancés.

So this young woman prayed for a guy. Then she got out her Bible and opened it at random to Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey."

Now, if you know the objective facts behind this verse, you realize that it was written about 500 BC as a prophecy concerning a coming Savior; a prophecy that Jesus later fulfilled when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey at the

beginning of Holy Week. But this college senior interpreted Zechariah 9:9 as God's promise to provide her with a Prince Charming, even if he showed up on a donkey instead of on a white charger.

This is not good Bible interpretation (as I hope you already concluded). The historical setting of the passage we're reading matters. We must pursue the objective facts.

Cross the Cultural Rivers

One of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons shows a guy lecturing his dog. In the first of two panels, the guy says: "OK, Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage! Understand, Ginger? Stay out of the garbage or else!" The caption under this first panel reads: *What People Say*. The caption under the second panel reads: *What Dogs Hear*. What does Ginger hear? The thought bubble above her head says: "Blah, blah, blah, blah . . ." In case you missed the point of the joke, there's a formidable communication barrier between people and dogs.

There's even a formidable communication barrier between people when two groups of humans come from vastly different cultures. Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever tried to explain American football to a Brazilian friend, or been greeted with a bear hug by a Russian coworker whom you hardly knew? Or maybe you've been on one of your church's short-term mission trips to Haiti, Czech Republic,

or Bangladesh. And you couldn't understand the language or the local customs.

One of my first mission trips, years ago, was to Amsterdam. Our Dutch hosts welcomed us with a meal. There was a milk bottle on the table that I assumed contained . . . well . . . milk. But as I poured it into my glass, it came out thick and lumpy. I just assumed that the milk wasn't homogenized and that the cream had floated to the top of the bottle. Well, I didn't want to pour it back, so I just drank it. Wow, was it sour!

Afterwards, one of the Dutch hosts asked me, "Is it the custom to *drink* yogurt in America?"

I quickly stammered, "Oh, yeah! Yogurt . . . of course. Love to drink that stuff."

As you read the Bible and *pursue the objective facts* that make up the historical setting of the passage you're looking at, you will also need to *cross some cultural rivers*. What I mean by that is: you will have to travel from *your* side of the river (a twenty-first-century, Western, technological society) to the *other* side of the river. If you're reading, let's say, the Old Testament book of Proverbs, the other side of the river is a tenth-century BC, Middle Eastern, agrarian society. If you're reading the New Testament epistle of 1 Corinthians, it's a first-century AD, Greco-Roman, urban society.

Walk

How to Apply the Bible

James L. Nicodem

MOODY PUBLISHERS

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Light for the Path

IF YOU EVER GET THE opportunity to visit Israel, make sure you visit Hezekiah's Tunnel—but bring a flashlight with you! Otherwise you will walk in complete darkness during your tunnel tour. The tunnel, located on the south side of the old city of Jerusalem, was constructed back in 700 BC by Israel's King Hezekiah as he was getting ready for an Assyrian invasion.

Jerusalem's major water supply at the time was the Gihon Spring, which, unfortunately, was located *outside* the city walls. That's not a good spot for your major water supply if your city is about to come under siege!

So King Hezekiah covered over the Gihon Spring and began building an underground aqueduct to divert the water to a pool (the Pool of Siloam) *inside* the city walls. One team of underground diggers started at the spring, while the other team started at the pool—and they somehow managed to meet in the middle! The finished aqueduct, five hundred yards long, was an engineering marvel in 700 BC.

Besides bringing a flashlight for your tunnel tour, be ready to walk through knee-deep, icy cold water for forty-five

minutes. I emphasize that flashlight because I remember Sue and I didn't have one when we made our trek through the tunnel a couple of summers ago. We were enrolled in a course at Jerusalem University College with forty other students, so we were counting on others in the class to come prepared. Only a few of them were. (Where are the Boy Scouts when you need them?)

It was a really, really dark and claustrophobic walk for most of the way. Our only consolation was knowing that if we kept moving forward—and the walls were so narrow and the ceiling was so low at times that forward was the only direction we *could* move—we would eventually end up at our destination. Yup, next time we'll bring a flashlight!

Turn On the Light!

Hezekiah's Tunnel is a metaphorical picture of our lives. On any given day, we can feel like we're in desperate need of light. There's a big decision looming in front of us, or we're in the middle of a crisis, or we're struggling in our parenting, or we're trying to figure out a career path, or there's conflict and confusion in some important relationship. And we're just not sure what to do next. We're *in the dark*, as the saying goes. We wish somebody would shine a little light on our path.

Well, that's exactly what God offers to do. The light that He shines is the light of His Word. In Psalm 119:105, the

psalmist says to God: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” God has given us His Word to *illuminate* our lives. In this chapter we are going to take a look at three important aspects of that illumination.

Illumination’s Source

A few years ago, the elders of our church were wrestling with a difficult situation. One of them mentioned a passage in the gospel of Matthew that he thought might be relevant to our discussion. We all turned to that text to take a closer look at it. But after we read the verses together, we weren’t quite sure how to interpret them correctly. No problem. I just pulled a commentary on Matthew’s Gospel off my shelf (a book of several hundred pages, written by a Bible scholar) and read aloud what it had to say about our passage. Unfortunately, we didn’t understand what the *commentary* had to say about the passage in Matthew that we didn’t understand. (Understand?)

Now what? Fortunately, the New Testament expert who had written that Matthew commentary is a friend of mine. He was one of my professors in graduate school. So I called him up. And I asked him for an explanation of his commentary’s explanation of our passage. We had a very enlightening conversation, after which I was able to guide our elders in applying an important principle from Matthew to our difficult situation.

Now, wouldn't *you* love to have the phone number of your very own Bible scholar/friend on speed dial? When you're reading the Bible this week and come across something you don't understand, you could just punch that number and Bob-the-Bible-Brain would pick up. Then you could ask him: "What's the deal with all those funky dietary laws that Moses recorded in Leviticus?" Or, "What does Paul mean by 'justification' in Romans 3?" Imagine having your very own Bible scholar/friend—just a phone call away.

Hey, I've got an even crazier idea! Instead of calling some modern-day Bible scholar, what if you could text your question to the *original* author of any portion of Scripture? What if you could contact Moses *directly* about those funky dietary laws in Leviticus, or ask the apostle Paul *himself* to explain justification in Romans 3 to you?

OK. I'll go one better than that—better than a modern-day Bible scholar at your service, better than a direct connection with one of the Bible's original authors. What if God Himself—who inspired those original human authors to write what they wrote—were available to explain Bible passages to you? Cool!

Well, I'm not making up this last option. Look at what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about God's assistance in illuminating our understanding of what He's communicated to us:

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:11–14)

Now, there's a ton of stuff in these verses that I would love to unpack—but I'm only going to take the time to explain the basic flow of what the apostle Paul is teaching here. First, Paul points out that nobody knows or understands God quite like God's own Spirit (verse 11: "No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God").

Second, Paul reminds his readers that, if they're now Christ followers, they have God's Spirit living on the inside. This is one of the benefits that Jesus promises those who surrender their lives to Him. When you ask Jesus to forgive your sins and rule your life, He gives you the Holy Spirit as a signing bonus (verse 12: "We have not received the spirit of the

world but the Spirit who is from God”).

Third, Paul explains that this is the reason that some people understand the things that come from God (e.g., the Bible) and other people don't. If you've begun to follow Jesus and have God's Spirit on the inside, God's Spirit helps you understand God's Word. On the other hand, if you're not yet a Christ follower, then the Holy Spirit doesn't indwell you and it's not surprising that you find the Bible to be confusing, boring, unrelated to your life, or just plain not worth reading.

This means that if you want God's Word to shine light on your path, you first need the Holy Spirit to shine light on God's Word. (That last sentence is so important that I'm going to ask you to go back and read it a second time. Thanks.)

Theologians have a name for the truth that I'm describing here. They call it the *doctrine of illumination*. God wants to speak to you. He speaks through His Word, the Bible. But you won't be able to make sense of what God's saying until you surrender your life to Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to live in you. Have you done that yet?

YOU CANNOT make sense of what God's saying until you surrender your life to Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to live in you.

Now, please don't misunderstand me here. You don't need the Holy Spirit in order to make sense of the Bible from

an *external* standpoint. Anybody can read a Bible and understand it externally. Anybody can follow the meaning of its words, or the structure of its sentences, or the logic of its passages. However, as Martin Luther, the great reformer and theologian of the sixteenth century, put it: there's a big difference between the *external* clarity of the Bible, which anybody can grasp, and the *internal* clarity of the Bible—what it means for our lives personally—which only those with God's Spirit on the inside can grasp. (I haven't been able to track down where Luther said this. But trust me—I'm sure he said it.)

And only when you are able to grasp God's Word does it begin to grasp you. Are you experiencing this? When you read the Bible, do things jump off the page at you? Do you get excited as you come across truths that have direct bearing on your life? That's God's Spirit *illuminating* the text for you.

In fact, every time you pick up your Bible to read it, or study it in a small group, or listen to it in a sermon, it's a good idea to offer a quick prayer: *God, may Your Spirit help me understand and apply to my life what I'm about to encounter in Your Word.* I can't emphasize strongly enough how important it is to approach God's Word by prayerfully inviting the Spirit to speak to you. If you're a Christ follower, the Holy Spirit is now your internal tutor.

Of course, this doesn't mean that everything you come across in the Bible is going to be easy to understand. Yes, the

Holy Spirit is going to help you. But like any good teacher who uses an assortment of pedagogical tools to get the job done (e.g., visual aids, textbooks, lab experiments), the Spirit uses a variety of means to help you understand and apply the Bible to your life: a study Bible, a good small group curriculum, the teaching pastors of your church, and so on. But you will still be amazed—once you have the Holy Spirit on the inside—at how much of the Bible comes alive to you with no outside help.

You may have been raised in a church tradition where you were taught *not* to study the Bible on your own. Without the assistance of a priest, or a minister, or a rabbi—you were warned—you would not be able to make sense of the Bible. While I would certainly agree that gifted teachers are a tremendous asset when it comes to gaining insight from God’s Word, let me repeat my point that the underlying source of all biblical understanding is the Holy Spirit. He is what you need most. And if you have Him, a good portion of the Bible is going to be clear to you without any additional input.

THE UNDERLYING source of all biblical understanding is the Holy Spirit. He is what you need most.

Theologians call this the *doctrine of perspicuity*. (It’s closely related to the *doctrine of illumination*, which I mentioned

earlier.) I'll bet you don't know what *perspicuity* means. Give up? It means *clarity*. You gotta love theologians—they choose an obscure word like *perspicuity* to talk about clarity.

The *doctrine of perspicuity* expresses a great truth. Here it is (in my own words): God's Word will be clear, for the most part, to those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. Why? Because the Spirit, as your resident tutor, will illuminate the Bible (see John 14:26; 16:13–15). And once the Spirit begins to illuminate the Bible for you, the Bible will be able to illuminate your life. You will discover, as the psalmist did, that God's Word is "a lamp to [your] feet and a light for [your] path" (Psalm 119:105).

Illumination's Condition

Let me tell you an Old Testament story about a guy named Naaman. (You can find it in 2 Kings 5 if you want to read it for yourself.) Naaman was the commander of the king's army in Aram, one of Israel's adversaries. The Bible describes him as "a great man in the sight of his master and . . . a valiant soldier" (v. 1). But in spite of all that Naaman had going for him, he had one horrific problem: *leprosy*. Leprosy was an incurable disease that could take his life.

As God would have it, in Naaman's household there was a Jewish servant girl who was familiar with the miracle-working ministry of an Israeli prophet named Elisha. When

the servant girl told her master about this potential source of healing, Naaman pulled together some money, got a letter of recommendation from his king, and made a beeline for Israel.

Arriving at Elisha's home and expecting to be personally welcomed by the prophet, Naaman was a tad insulted when a servant was sent to the door to greet him. And what was worse—the servant delivered these bizarre instructions to Naaman: “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored” (v. 10). Well, Naaman was a proud man and the Jordan River was a dirty and unimpressive stream, so he rejected Elisha's secondhand counsel. There was no way that he was going to obey this humiliating directive. Naaman revved up his chariot and prepared to return home to Aram.

But Naaman's servants wouldn't let their boss throw in the towel. They said (my paraphrase of verse 13): “Yeah, it looks like a stupid command—dunk in the Jordan River seven times. But what harm would it do to give it a try?” So Naaman gave it a try. And he came out of the water completely cleansed of his leprosy.

Here's the point that I want to draw out of this story. As long as Naaman refused to heed Elisha's instructions, those instructions had zero impact on his life. In fact, those instructions seemed ridiculous (unreasonable, absurd, preposterous) to him. But once Naaman made up his mind to *obey* the words of

God's prophet, those instructions changed his life. It will work the same way in your life. Only when you come to the Bible with a submissive attitude will the Bible truly impact you.

If you approach the Bible with an unsubmissive attitude, not only will you gain nothing from it, you may even conclude that some of its instructions are just plain stupid. So illumination's condition is a submissive attitude. God's Word is not going to make sense to you until you approach it with a willingness to do what it says. The Holy Spirit is eager to illuminate the Bible for those who are eager to obey it. Note the close connection between illumination and obedience in the following passage:

ONLY WHEN you come to the Bible with a submissive attitude will the Bible truly impact you.

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:23–26)