

“Thrive”: Forging a Vital Faith
Framing the Story of God
Text: selected
1.20.19



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Think about one of your favorite movies or stories. Why are they so appealing to you? What is it that draws you in and holds your attention? What do you think makes for a good story?”

“If you are familiar with the Bible, at all, did you approach more as a textbook or a story? What happens when we read the Bible as fragmented, theological bits? What is the advantage of understanding the Bible as story?”

CREATION

“How would you describe the conditions that existed in the garden? What do you think they tell you about God? About us?”

“How would you define ‘sin’ as you encounter it in the first (3) chapters of Genesis?”

COVENANT

“What was God’s promise to Abraham? How was Israel meant to respond? What does it mean to be a ‘blessing’?”

INCARNATION

“What was the significance of God becoming human in Jesus? What does it say about God? What does it say about us?”

“Now that Jesus has come, what misconceptions about God did it clear up for you?”

NEW CREATION

“Why is it so important to have a story that is actually leading us somewhere? How have you found hope in knowing that God’s plan ultimately involves a world set right? What excites you about God’s new world that is coming? How are we to live in response?”

Teaching Notes...

Everyone tells stories to help them understand their world. To help justify their existence. To give shape to their values, permission to their will, and direction to their lives.

We were created to think in “story-form” but trained to think in terms of “proposition”. Tables. Measurables. Empirical data. Proof.

The biblical narrative comes to us as a larger-than-life story which doesn’t bypass our logic, but is simply not limited to human intellect. It address super-sized problems and offers super-sized resolutions where justice wins over injustice, where good conquers evil, where meaning arises out of the chaos.

The process of shaping our approach looks like this:

experience → **interpret** → **respond** (based on conclusions)

Christianity offers it this way:

revelation (God reveals the way things are) → **lens through which we interpret our experiences** → **we respond, faith-fully**

- Our story is NOT the only creation story being offered (it still isn’t). Some have creation happening more incidentally and spontaneously. Many have creation happening as either some cosmic act of violence or the surprising result of a twisted, sexual encounter between the gods.

Our Story declares that creation is just that, “creation”: the thoughtful, intentional action of a good and benevolent God. The Story is not being told so that God might get equal-representation. It is being told to subvert all the other stories. It is saying, “This IS the story.”

Framing the Story in (4) movements:

CREATION- COVENANT- INCARNATION- NEW CREATION

CREATION

“In the beginning, God...” (Genesis 1)

The Story never seeks to prove the existence of God, it simply assumes it. Genesis gets us all off to a great start. God speaking. God acting. God hovering. God interacting.

The raw elements of creation being functionally arranged to bring order out of the chaos. It just seemed that the earth--- the Story--- was waiting for us.

Humanity (adam) in vital union with their Creator. Humanity enjoying “shame-free” relationship with one another. Creation being lovingly-stewarded. **“It’s all good!”** Delightful (Eden). The way it ought to be. Flourishing.

We were identified uniquely among creation as *“image-bearers”*. It means that we were to reflect God and to represent his nature and purposes for his good world. It means that we could go to him to find out “who we are” and “why we are” and, as a

result, develop a sense of “**significance**” (identity/worth/value) and “**security**” (place to belong).

Right in the middle of that delightful setting were placed (2) trees: the “tree of life” and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. It’s the (2)-ways motif that is woven all throughout the story: *“Who will decide what is good and right? Who will define life? Whose will is going to be established and obeyed?”*

From the very beginning, when we hear God say to Adam, “... *don’t eat of the tree...*” (Genesis 2), we all know what he’s going to do! Why? Because it’s what we would do. We are all born with the “grasping instinct”; reaching for things which are pleasing to the eyes, but prove ultimately harmful.

Evil is an interloper. The snake is telling a different story. It is a suspicious presence. Sin, we discover, is not one really-bad-decision, but a propensity toward self-reliance and autonomy. It is resident within us all.

Something in us “died”, just as God said it would. Sin drove us all in the wrong direction, away from God, in mistrust, and away from each other in cover-up and blame.

The story quickly goes from bad to worse: deceit, widespread violence, and the ultimate expression of human arrogance--- the Tower of Babel. The tower was not just an ill-advised building project, but a monument to themselves! When they looked in the mirror, instead of seeing themselves as a reflection of God, all they could see was themselves. It was the ultimate “ancient selfie”! God knows the potential he has invested in us and discerns that the only way to deal with such collaborative-evil is to separate everyone [Genesis 11].

Even at this point of the story, there is a hint of rescue:

“And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Genesis 3

COVENANT

It is in this context that we are introduced to a guy named Abram (Genesis 12). God chooses another man, another family, to set in motion the restoration project: Abram. Matthew will trace Jesus’ lineage all the way back to him.

God makes promises to Abram about “*blessing the whole world through him*” and then reinforces it by entering into a special relationship with him: “covenant” [ancient treaty outlining the relationship between a sovereign and his people]. Abram is to be what Adam was meant to be: he is to experience God, to trust God, to defer to God so that God might extend blessing to the whole world through him.

One slight difficulty with the covenant: humanity doesn't "do" commitment. ***"What do you do when the people that you have chosen to be part of the solution now become part of the problem?"***

Abram becomes Abraham who gives birth to Isaac who gives birth the Jacob, who becomes "Israel". The remainder of the OT traces the movements (loyalties and epic failures) of this family.

The extended family eventually finds themselves in Egypt, enslaved and abused. God hears their cries for help, *remembers his covenant* with Abram, demonstrates himself as compassionate and leads his people out with a vision of livingly freely in a place they can call home. **"Exodus"**- an exit; a way out.

Having finally made it into the land of promise, the people of God continued to struggle to live freely. Judges records for us this self-destructive cycle that the people find themselves in: *rebellion, oppression, cries for mercy, rescue, blessing, amnesia and "allemande left, back to your partner and promenade"!*

In 2 Samuel 7, God promises that in the midst of the ambiguity and the succession of failed kings, there remained hope for a new King, one with a *"heart after God's"* like David who would rule rightly [Psalm 89].

As a result of their infidelity, the people of God lose their identity and forfeit their mission. They end up, once again, in captivity. The "exile".

It is during this time of despair that the prophets bring a word of "hope". Hope that God would, again, hear them and respond in rescue. The prophets spoke of one who would come from God through Abraham, through Israel and the line of David to make a "new covenant" with his people.

Isaiah 61 envisions this king as being empowered by the very Spirit of God--- he would be "anointed"; he would be the 'Messiah'.

INCARNATION

Jesus, "God with us". Jesus, the one Paul called the "new Adam" (Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 15). The one who would not come to "abolish the law, but fulfill it" (Matthew 5). The one whom Peter would acknowledge as the "Christ" (Messiah). Jesus is the Story that God was telling.

Jesus is the way that God comes to us. Jesus is the way that we come to God. Not just as mental assent to some proposed God-facts, but the way in which we are restored--- the way in which salvation happens in us and through us every day.

The biographers are all suggesting that what we are watching, in often coded ways, is God himself (with skin: incarnation) entering our dilemma--- meeting us at the place of our pain and ruin and suffering--- and actually taking it upon himself so that we might experience the life for which we were created.

This is God dying “**with**”; God dying “**for**” us; and God dying “**instead of**” us.

NEW CREATION

The real hope of the Story is that all of creation is heading somewhere--- toward a purposed-end, where God finally gets what God wants: “shalom”.

When God does finally act, it will have dramatic implications for the whole world-- every people in every dark and chaotic corner of creation. The world will finally be all that it is groaning to be (Romans 8).

Genesis 1-2: Humanity at home with God. Flourishing.

Revelation 21-22: God’s home is with humanity. Flourishing.

We as the people of God will always be best known for how we live in the “interlude”: in the time between Jesus resurrection and departure and his return.

“**interlude**”: in a musical piece, it’s a necessary movement toward something else.

Wherever people are living in uncomplicated-obedience and surrender to Jesus and his desires/ways, empowered by the Spirit and delightfully serving and sharing the Gospel with others, restoration is being experienced. New creation is happening.

It means that as Kingdom-people, not only pray for its coming, but we make it happen all around us. We work with God as his “collaborative-partners” to restore as much order as we can. We disperse as a people of “hope” into a world that God longs to recover.

“What if this Story is true? What if I am hearing this for the first time and I decide that I want this story to be my story?”

The biblical narrative suggests no way to flourish which does not involve “confession” and “repentance”.

confession- the gift that God gives us due to our inability to receive grace. It’s a way to be honest without all the “self-loathing”. It is the safe confines in which we can learn to live life “*out in the open*”, not without sin, just without pretense. We don’t have to fake it, anymore.

repentance- is the gift that God gives us which not only allows us to admit our brokenness but provides the courage to live differently--- to choose a less self-destructive path for our lives. Repentance allows us to create distance between our brokenness and who we are becoming. “*I’m not that person anymore!*”