



THE  
DIVINE  
DRAMA

PETER SAUNDERS

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*Each and every human journey is played out on the stage of a grand divine drama that encompasses all of history.*

*This drama was planned and set in motion even before humans existed, and on our own we would know nothing of it. But we have not been left like actors stumbling in the dark without a script.*

*Thankfully God has provided us with all we need to know about his plan, his divine drama, in the Bible.*

A young man, who had recently become a Christian, was revelling in his new found faith. He longed for his classmates to discover the same joy, meaning and purpose that he was experiencing. So he sneaked into his school classroom early one morning and boldly wrote 'Jesus is the answer' on the board in tall bold letters. When he returned an hour later for the start of his class, he saw that someone had written underneath, 'But what is the question?' As he grew in his Christian faith, he realised that life asked more and more deep questions of him with each passing year, but decades later he was still able to say that for every one of them Jesus was the answer.

This booklet is written out of the twin convictions that Jesus Christ is the ultimate answer to all life's deep and complex questions and that the Bible is crucial in understanding and knowing him.

## A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

As thinking Christians we understandably want to wrestle with the complex issues life throws at us, but we will only be able to think through them effectively if we approach them from a proper understanding of Christ's mission and the big story of God's intervention in history told in the Bible.

When William Tyndale translated the Bible into English in the 16th century he met with stiff opposition from the established church and eventually paid for it with his life. But, as he said to one critical cleric, his motivation was to make God's Word accessible to ordinary people:

*'If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost...'*

Over a century later John Bunyan, author of the classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote in the cover of his Bible: 'Either this book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.' Bunyan understood deeply that the

Word of God is the weapon we simply cannot neglect. The apostle Paul says that God's Word is 'the sword of the Spirit' (Ephesians 6:17) and the unnamed writer of Hebrews says it 'penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow' and 'judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Hebrews 4:12). As Paul famously said to Timothy:

*'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'*  
(2 Timothy 3:16-17)

It is a great tragedy that, at a time when the Bible is more readily accessible to us than at any point in history, so few Christians know it intimately and love it deeply.

This booklet attempts to remedy that by laying the foundation of God's plan in history, as revealed in the Bible. If you are looking for a simple overview of how it all fits together then this is for you.

## THE BIG PICTURE

The Bible is a collection of 66 different books written by over 30 different authors in three continents and in three languages over a period of 1,500 years. It has been carefully compiled from reliable copies of the original manuscripts (hand-written documents).

As Christians we believe that the Bible is both divinely inspired (God-breathed) and an accurate record of God's dealings with human beings. It is arranged in two main sections. The Old Testament, containing 39 books, starts with the creation narrative and ends with the Jewish people returning to the land of Israel from exile in the fifth century BC. The New Testament, with 27 books, begins over 400 years later with the birth of Jesus Christ and ends with the establishment of the Christian church in the first century prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70.

The Old Testament consists of history, prophecy and wisdom literature (poems, songs and proverbs). The New Testament contains biographical accounts of the life of Christ and his apostles along with letters written by the apostles to early churches and church leaders.

The Bible's account of human history, past, present and future, is linear with a beginning, middle and end. It begins with two people in a garden (Genesis 2) and ends in a city with 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' (Revelation 7:9, 21:2). The biblical metanarrative (big story) tells of God's great salvation plan through Jesus Christ who 'gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own' (Titus 2:13-14).

We get the first hint of Jesus in Genesis 1. He is God's word bringing the universe into being. In the very last verses of Revelation he comes to collect his bride, the church: "'Yes, I am coming soon.'" Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.' The Bible, quite simply, is all about Jesus.

The biblical metanarrative (big overarching story) has four main themes: creation, fall, salvation and new creation. The bulk of the Bible deals with the story of salvation, the account of God's plan to rescue his people and to reconcile the universe to himself. Understanding how this story unravels, and therefore how each book fits into it, is the key to knowing, loving and applying it.

As Christians we need fully to grasp this big picture.

It is God who is in control of history and the universe itself. He is its Creator (Genesis 1:1-2; Psalm 8:3; 2 Peter 3:5), Owner (Psalm 24:1; Job 41:11), Sustainer (Hebrews 1:3; Psalm 147:8-9, 15-18), Director (Daniel 2:21, 4:17; Isaiah 40:15, 22-24) and Redeemer (Romans 8:20-22; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5).

God started history and will bring it to an end (Revelation 5:9-6:1). His ultimate plan is a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17, 66:22) where there will be no more death, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4), populated by a people drawn from every nation (Genesis 12:3; Revelation 7:9) who have been set apart to do his will (Titus 2:11-14; 1 Peter 2:9).

He is now in the process of gathering this people (Matthew 24:31) before the world as we know it is destroyed (Zephaniah 1:2-3; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 21:1).

Let's unpack this big picture in more detail.

## CREATION, REBELLION AND PROMISE

The Bible begins with the account of creation (Genesis 1-2), the fall (Genesis 3) and the establishment of civilisation (Genesis 4-5). After God made the universe he created human beings in his own image to know and love him, but they rebelled against his rule which led to changes in themselves and in their relationship with each other, the creation and God himself.

The fall meant that human beings came under God's judgment. In short, all of us were destined for exclusion from God's presence forever because of our rebellion. But God then took the initiative both to protect us from the full consequences of the fall, and ultimately to rescue us from our otherwise inevitable fate. The rebellion of the first human beings led to the rebellion of the entire human race and its destruction in the flood, from which Noah and his family survived after following God's direction to build the ark (Genesis 6-8).

After further massive population growth and the formation of the nations (Genesis 9-10) humankind rebelled again and built the tower of Babel. This led to a further intervention by God who confused their language, thus creating distinct cultural groups, and scattered them throughout the earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

After these pivotal events, the Bible narrative focuses down on one individual in the ancient city of Harran, in the river valley of upper Mesopotamia, close to the Syrian border in what we now know as Southern Turkey. Abram's father Terah had taken his family from the city of 'Ur of the Chaldeans', in modern day Southern Iraq on the Persian Gulf. He had intended to reach Canaan, present day Israel, but had opted instead to settle in Harran and died there (Genesis 11:27-32).

By the 19th century BC, Harran was already established as a merchant

outpost due to its ideal location. The community, well established before then, was situated along a trade route between the Mediterranean and the plains of the middle Tigris. It was in Harran that God called Abram (later to be renamed Abraham) and made him a wonderful promise:

*'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.  
I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'*  
(Genesis 12:1-3)

Note that there were three main parts to this promise: a land, a nation and a blessing to all nations. Abram obeys God and goes to Canaan where God appears to him again and promises him that his descendants will be like the stars in the sky in number (Genesis 15:5). He reiterates his promise of the land but also warns him that his descendants will be 'strangers in a country not their own' for 400 years and will be 'enslaved and mistreated there' (Genesis 15:12-15).

The rest of the book of Genesis tells the story of the Patriarchs, Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, who would be renamed Israel.

God repeats the promise about 'offspring' to both Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 22:17-18, 26:4, 28:13-14) but the book of Genesis ends with the family in Egypt where they are to be slaves. The nation of Israel has been born.

Later we will learn that the word 'offspring' has a double meaning. It refers to the nation of Israel but also to Jesus Christ himself (Genesis 3:15; Galatians 3:16-19).

## EXODUS, KINGDOM AND CONQUEST

The exodus from Egypt, Israel's liberation from slavery, under the leadership of Moses is recounted in the book of Exodus. According to the biblical record this happened in about 1446 BC.

After Israel's liberation God makes a covenant (solemn agreement) with his chosen people (Exodus 19:4-6; Leviticus 18:5), gives them the ten commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) and establishes the sacrificial system that is to be the basis of his relationship with him. Both the moral law and the temple sacrifices again foreshadow the coming of Christ.

After their deliverance, Israel rebel against God which results in a prolonged stay in the Sinai desert. But after 40 years God brings this nation of former slaves, under Joshua's leadership, into Canaan, the Promised Land.

The conquest of this land follows, recounted in the book of Joshua, and the nation of Israel settles there under the leadership of judges, told in the book of the same name. The judges rescue Israel from the attacks of surrounding nations, including the Midianites and the Philistines. Amongst the best known of the twelve judges are Gideon and Samson. Finally the prophet Samuel takes over the nation's leadership.

The people then demand a king so Samuel establishes the Israelite monarchy under Saul and then David (1 and 2 Samuel). During the reign of David's son Solomon the nation of Israel enjoys its glory days, but the story that follows is then one of division and general decline.

## DIVISION AND EXILE

When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, becomes king the ten northern tribes of Israel revolt and become a separate nation (1 Kings 11). After years of attrition, and in spite of the warnings of prophets like Elijah and Amos, this northern kingdom is finally destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC and its inhabitants are lost to the pages of history (2 Kings 17).

The southern kingdom, renamed Judah, from which the word 'Jew' is derived, is finally overthrown by the Babylonians in 587 BC and its people

taken into exile (2 Kings 25; Psalm 37). During this period, through Daniel and his friends, the nation's faith is rekindled, and they understand from the words of the prophet Jeremiah that they will return to the Promised Land.

After living in exile for 70 years they return, with the blessing of King Cyrus of the Persians, the new global power, and re-establish the nation of Israel under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophets Malachi, Zechariah and Haggai provide encouragement and guidance during this period.

This is the basic historical skeleton of the Old Testament on which all of its individual stories hang and begin to make sense. Understanding this basic history is the key to putting it all together.

Throughout history, in spite of God's ongoing faithfulness, the people of Israel repeatedly reject him and break his covenant. Their military defeats and later destruction of Israel are a consequence of this rejection.

## THE COMING KING

Through the prophets, who repeatedly call Israel back into a faithful relationship with God, he promises to establish a new covenant with them, in which he will write his laws on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34), cleanse them, regenerate them and enable them to live in obedience to him (Ezekiel 36:24-26).

These promises are ultimately to find their fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ. There is a gap of just over 400 years between the return of the Jews from captivity and the birth of Jesus. This is termed the inter-testamental period as it is not covered by either Old or New Testaments, except in the prophecies of the later chapters of the book of Daniel.

During this period the Greeks, under the leadership of Alexander the Great, take over from the Persians as the predominant world power. When Alexander dies his empire is divided into four parts and the Jews undergo a further period of persecution under the Greek General Antiochus IV. Under the leadership of the Maccabees they throw off the Greek yoke. This period is recounted in the books of the Apocrypha, which are not part of the canon of Scripture.

The Greek Empire is then overturned by the Romans, who invade Israel's capital Jerusalem in AD 63. At the time of Jesus' birth some 60 years later Israel is still under Roman occupation.

As the Old Testament progresses it becomes clear that the real children of Abraham do not include just those who are biologically descended from him but rather those who will share his faith in God (Romans 4:13, 16-17; Galatians 3:6-14). They are to come from all nations (Genesis 17:5). Ironically many of Abraham's biological descendants end up being excluded from God's people.

God's original promise to Abraham was that all nations would be blessed through him and it is not surprising that throughout the Old Testament, even before the time of Christ, there are hints of other nations and other individuals being blessed through their encounter with the people of Israel.

We see this in God's concern for the great empires of Egypt (Genesis 47:25-26), Assyria (Jonah 4:11), Media and Persia (Daniel 6:25-26). Egypt was saved from starvation during a destructive famine through Joseph's wise intervention. Assyria was saved from God's judgment when those in the capital city of Nineveh repented from their sins after hearing Jonah preach. Daniel was able to interpret the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and to minister to him during a severe mental illness.

We see God's concern for non-Israelites in his blessing of individuals like Ishmael (Genesis 21:17), the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1), the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16; Luke 4:26-27), Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-14), Job and Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1) and in his inclusion of Rahab and Ruth from enemy nations in the messianic line (Matthew 1:5).

These are all signs that God's salvation is eventually going to reach beyond the people of Israel to touch every nation of the earth.

We also see God's love for all people in the many specific prophecies in the Old Testament with regard to the Gentiles (Psalm 67:1-7; Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 65:19-20; Amos 9:11-12; Habakkuk 2:14). Israel may have been the nation God chose initially in his plan of salvation but God has plans for all nations and all peoples. God is sovereign over all the nations and determines

their movements (Acts 17:26; Amos 9:7; Daniel 2:21, 2:31-42, 4:17, 4:25, 4:32, 5:21, 5:7-12; Isaiah 40:15-17, 40:21-24). He also brings them all to judgment (Psalm 2, 82:1-7).

But it becomes clear through the Old Testament that the instrument by which God's salvation will come to all the nations is not the nation of Israel, but rather one man.

## THE MAN WHO IS GOD

The Bible tells us that this one man will be descended through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 12:1-3, 26:4, 28:13-14; Numbers 24:17-19), Judah (Genesis 49:10; 1 Chronicles 28:4; Zechariah 10:4), Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), David (2 Samuel 7:13, 16) and Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:23).

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke complete this genealogy for us showing the person to be none other than Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-37). The 'Christ', 'Messiah' in Greek, is identified in the Old Testament in a variety of titles and roles.

He is called the Son of God (Psalm 2, 110) and the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) to whom the nations of the world will be given as an inheritance. The prophet Isaiah calls him the Servant (Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12; Matthew 12:18-21) and tells us that he will suffer and die on behalf of his people. Moses calls him the Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:14-22) who will bring God's message and the Sons of Korah refer to him as the Bridegroom who will form a deep intimate relationship with his people and will reign forever (Psalm 45). In other places he takes the titles of Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6-7), Chosen One (Psalm 89), Anointed One (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19), the branch (Jeremiah 33:15-16; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12) and the shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1-9).

The New Testament message is that Jesus is the Messiah, the true Israel (Genesis 28:12; John 1:51) and that in him Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) can be reconciled to God and united as one (Luke 9-10, 21:24; Ephesians 2:14, 3:6; Romans 11:11-12; Revelation 7:4-9).

Many of these Old Testament passages (eg Psalm 2, 45, 110) make it clear that this Messiah is not only a man, with flesh and blood, but also God himself. This is spelt out even more clearly in the New Testament. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

## THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

'Agnus Dei' (literally 'Lamb of God') is an oil painting of a bound lamb upon an altar by Francisco de Zurbarán, which was started in 1636 and completed in 1640. It represents the teaching right at the very heart of the Christian faith whereby God makes peace with estranged and guilty human beings through the death of his Son Jesus Christ on a Roman cross.

Jesus is called the 'Lamb of God' because his death was an act of 'substitutionary atonement'. In other words Jesus died in our place receiving the judgment and wrath that our sins deserved. This idea is at the heart of Old Testament teaching – God clothes Adam and Eve in the skin of slaughtered animals; he produces a sheep as a substitute for Abraham's offering of his son Isaac; in the Passover, the Jewish sacrificial system and the day of atonement.

God clothed Adam and Eve in animal skins to protect them from his wrath. The sheep caught in the brambles similarly protected Isaac by dying in his place. During the Passover the spreading of a lamb's blood over the doorways of the Israelite homes protected the eldest sons from the destroying angel, the instrument of God's judgment, whilst the eldest sons of Egyptians, without such protection, died.

The elaborate Jewish sacrificial system involved the slaughter of thousands of animals for the sins of the Israelites. God protected his people from the wrath and judgment that they so badly deserved. The day of atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, involved sending a goat (on which the sins of Israel had been placed) out into the wilderness.

In all of these instances a temporary reprieve was achieved for sinful

human beings. But their purpose was to foreshadow and point to the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, on the cross.

Estranged human beings were to be 'made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:1-10). Through dying on the cross Jesus took God's wrath and judgment that our sins actually deserved. It is precisely because he has taken that wrath and judgment in our place that we receive God's grace and mercy, and are thereby forgiven. Our sins had to be paid for. But because we could not pay for them ourselves, Jesus did so instead on our behalf.

Nowhere is this principle of 'substitutionary atonement' spelt out more explicitly in the Old Testament than in Isaiah 53, the last of the four servant songs, written 700 years before Christ was crucified but written in anticipation of it:

*'Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him,  
and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed  
for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by  
his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned  
to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'*  
(Isaiah 53:4-6)

The central theme in Isaiah 53 (verse seven) is that of the 'agnus dei', the Lamb of God, who 'did not open his mouth', was 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' and 'as a sheep before its shearers is silent'. In the same way substitutionary atonement is the central teaching of the New Testament.

Paul says that Jesus died 'for us' (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10) and also that he died 'for our sins' (1 Corinthians 15:3;

Galatians 1:4). Jesus describes his own ministry as giving his life 'as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45) and Peter says 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Peter 2:24). Paul tells Timothy that Christ 'gave himself as a ransom for all people' (1 Timothy 2:6). The writer of Hebrews adds that Christ 'died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant' (Hebrews 9:15). Peter sums it up in saying that 'Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God' (1 Peter 3:18).

The New Testament explains substitutionary atonement with four main metaphors. First is the metaphor of the altar of sacrifice. Christ is the sacrificial lamb whose blood is shed in our place. It is we who deserved to die but Christ substituted himself instead. Second is the slave market. Christ paid the redemption price that we could not pay in order to free us from bondage. He bore the cost for us. Third is the law court. Christ is our justification, that is, he took the punishment that we deserved in order than we might not be condemned. Fourth is the metaphor of relationship. Christ's death on our behalf brings reconciliation after our unilateral abandonment of God.

## JESUS' GREAT COMMISSION

God's plan was to bring reconciliation through Jesus' death on the cross between himself and sinful humankind. The gospels show in great detail how he achieved that. Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah through his teaching, actions and miracles and ultimately through his death and his resurrection from the dead. He then gave his great commission to his followers to make disciples of all nations 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19).

The task of the church is thereby to be Jesus Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:8) and to call people to repentance and faith (John 3:16, 5:24; Romans 10:9-10). Jesus' death and resurrection provided the means of reconciliation.

But individuals were to receive this by putting their trust in him through both believing and acting on his teaching. 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:9). To all who received Christ in this way God gave the power to become children of God (John 1:12). He gave them a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17) and the gift of his Holy Spirit to live within them and enable them to understand his Word and obey his commands (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

The early church was entirely Jewish (Acts 1:15, 2:5-41) but rapidly spread beyond Jewish borders. Gentiles were brought into the Kingdom after the Jews' rejection of Christ (Luke 4:24-27; John 4; Luke 10:13-15, 11:29-32; Acts 13:46-47, 28:28; Romans 11:11-27) and the Bible teaches that Jews will come in again in much larger numbers prior to Christ's return (Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:15, 25-26).

The book of Acts is laid out according to the scheme in Acts 1:8 to show the spread of the Gospel to Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-8:1), all Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-40) and to the ends of the earth – first to Jews (9:1-11:19) and then to Gentiles (Acts 11:20-28:31). The book of Revelation ends finally with Jews and Gentiles united in one Kingdom (Revelation 7:4-10, 21:24-26).

Jesus prophesied during his lifetime on earth that Jerusalem would be destroyed and that the Jews would be scattered all over the world (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). This happened when the Romans ethnically cleansed the city in AD 70. It would not be until 1948 that Jewish people, after the Nazi Holocaust of the Second World War, in which six million died, would eventually return to Israel, where many remain today.

Even more seriously Jesus clearly taught that there would be a great day of judgment when all human beings who have ever lived will stand before God and be sent to one of two destinations: either to the new heaven and new earth to enjoy God forever, or to be excluded from his presence forever in hell. These events are described in the later chapters of Revelation, the Bible's last book.

This then is the great biblical story of creation, fall, salvation and new creation. ■

God has given us all we need to know in the Bible – his divine drama. In this Bible overview, Peter Saunders, CMF Chief Executive, outlines the great story of creation, fall, salvation and new creation. The bulk of the Bible deals with the story of salvation, the account of God's plan to rescue his people and to reconcile the universe to himself. Quite simply, from beginning to end, it's all about Jesus.

If you are looking for a simple overview of how it all fits together then this is for you.

