



PROLOGUE

THE DIVINE DRAMA

We are all on the Human Journey – from birth to death, through health and sickness. We are all part of life's adventure. But our limited human perspectives can only be understood in the light of God's perfect perspective. 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 before the universe began. But God has not left us like actors stumbling in the dark without a script. Thankfully he has provided us with all we need to know about his great plan, his *divine drama*, in the Bible.

If we are to think biblically about health, then we first need to think biblically. We cannot gain a Christian perspective on medicine and health without first seeing how they fit into God's great plan of salvation. So it's essential at the outset that we don't dive in before taking time to understand what the Bible is all about. The Bible provides the framework.

A book like no other

The Bible helps us to understand Christ's mission and the big story of God's intervention in history. The apostle Paul says that the Bible is 'the sword of the Spirit' (Ephesians 6:17). It's literally 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16).

The word 'Bible' means 'books' – the Bible is actually a collection of 66 different books written by over 30 different authors across three

continents in three languages over a period of 1,500 years, which has been carefully compiled from reliable copies of the original manuscripts. 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 sixth century BC. The New Testament, with 27 books, begins about 400 years later with the birth of Jesus Christ. It ends with the establishment of the Christian church in the first century AD, and gives a glorious view of the future when Christ returns.

The Old Testament consists of history, prophecy and wisdom literature (poems, songs and proverbs). The New Testament contains 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 is linear with a beginning, middle and end. It begins with two people in a garden and ends in a city with 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' (Revelation 7:9).

The biblical metanarrative (or big story) tells of God's great salvation plan through Jesus Christ. We get the first hint of Jesus in Genesis 1 where 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. The Bible, quite simply, is all about Jesus!

We can summarise the biblical narrative under 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, to reveal his kingdom here on earth through his people and to reconcile the universe to himself. Understanding how this story unfolds, and therefore how each book fits into it, is the key to knowing, loving and applying it.

Let's therefore examine the basic historical skeleton of the Old Testament on which all of its individual stories hang and begin to make sense.

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, shattering their relationships with each other, with creation and with God himself. This rebellion of the first human beings – known as the Fall – led the entire human race into rebellion until ‘every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time’ (Genesis 6:5). Then God sent the Flood, from which only Noah and his family were saved in the ark (Genesis 6–9). After further massive population growth and the formation of the nations, people 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 10–11). But then God’s rescue plan began. It was in Haran – near the border between Turkey and Syria today – 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)

There are three main parts to this promise: a land, a nation and a blessing to all nations. The rest of Genesis (chapters 12–50) tells the story of the Patriarchs, Abraham’s son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, who would be renamed Israel. God repeats his promise of offspring to both Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 22:17–18, 26:4, 28:13–14) but 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 God’s promise of ‘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 book of Exodus recounts Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Comparing the biblical record to the best available evidence outside the Bible dates this event to about 1446 BC. After Israel's liberation, God makes a covenant with his chosen people, gives them the Ten Commandments and establishes the sacrificial system that is to maintain their on-going relationship with him. Both the moral law and the temple sacrifices foreshadow the coming of Christ.

After their deliverance from Egypt, the nation of Israel rebels against God resulting in a prolonged stay in the Sinai desert. But after 40 years in the wilderness (covered in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), 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. The nation of Israel settles in the land under the leadership of Judges like Gideon and Samson, who rescue them from the attacks of surrounding nations. Eventually leadership of the nation falls to the prophet Samuel. Looking with envy at the nations around them, the people demand a king and Samuel reluctantly establishes the Israelite monarchy, anointing Saul as the first king, who is later succeeded by David (1 and 2 Samuel). During the reign of David's son Solomon, the nation of Israel enjoys its glory days, but following this the story is 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 12). 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; 2 Chronicles 36). During this period, through Daniel and his friends, the nation's faith is rekindled, and they understand from the words of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:8–14) that they will return to their promised land.

Seventy years after being exiled to Babylon they return with the blessing of King Cyrus of Persia, the new global power, and re-establish the nation of Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophets Malachi, Zechariah and Haggai provide encouragement and guidance during this period.

Throughout all these centuries, in spite of God's on-going faithfulness, the people of Israel repeatedly reject him, break his covenant and fail to become the blessing to other nations outlined in God's promise to Abraham. The 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 law 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 ultimately find their fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ.

There is a gap of just over 400 years between the ministry of the final Old Testament prophet Malachi and the birth of Jesus. This is called the 'inter-testamental period' as it is not covered by either Old or New Testaments. 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, as prophesied by Daniel, and the Jews undergo a further period of terrible persecution under the Greek General Antiochus IV. Under the leadership of the Maccabees they throw off the oppressive Greek yoke. Events of this period are recorded in the books of the Apocrypha which are not regarded as being inspired by God and so

are not included in most Bibles. The Greek Empire is then overturned by the Romans, who invade Jerusalem in 63 BC. When Jesus is born some 60 years later, Israel is still under Roman occupation.

As the Old Testament progresses it becomes clear that the real children of Abraham are not just those who are biologically descended from him but rather those who share his faith in God. They are to come from all nations. The instrument by which God's salvation will come to all the nations is not the nation of Israel itself but rather one man, the *Messiah*.

The *Messiah*, meaning 'Anointed One', is identified in the Old Testament by a variety of titles and roles. He is called the Son of God (Psalm 2) and the Son of Man to whom the nations of the world will be given as an inheritance (Daniel 7:13–14). The prophet Isaiah calls him the Servant and tells us that he will suffer and die on behalf of his people (Isaiah 53). Moses calls him the Prophet who will bring God's message (Deuteronomy 18:14–22) and the Psalms 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 is called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6–7) and the Chosen One (Psalm 89).

The Bible tells us that this one man will be descended through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Judah, Jesse, David and Zerubbabel. 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 Lamb of God

The New Testament's message is that Jesus is the Messiah (John 1:41) and that in him Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) can be reconciled to God and united as one. Many of the Old Testament passages above make it clear that this Messiah is not only a man, with flesh and blood, but is also God himself (eg Isaiah 9:6), Matthew claims the title of 'Immanuel' for him – God with us (Matthew 1:22–23). John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the

sin of the world (John 1:29). The significance of this title is drawn from the Old Testament. During the first Passover in Egypt 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. The Egyptians, without such protection, died (Exodus 11–12). The elaborate Jewish sacrificial system (Leviticus 1–9), which involved the slaughter of thousands of animals for the sins of the Israelites, protected God's people from the wrath and judgment that they rightly 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 (Leviticus 16).

In all of these instances a temporary reprieve was achieved for sinful human beings. But the real purpose of these sacrifices was to foreshadow and point forward to the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, on the cross, which would deal with sin once and for all. So Jesus is called the 'Lamb of God' because like the Passover lamb his death was an act of *substitutionary atonement*. In other words Jesus died *in our place*, receiving the punishment that our sins deserved. This teaching is at the very heart of the Christian faith; God makes peace with estranged, guilty and rebellious human beings through the death of his Son Jesus Christ. As sinful human beings we all fall short of God's standards and deserve God's condemnation. Because Jesus has taken that wrath and judgment in our place, 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 on our behalf.

Isaiah 53, the last of the four 'servant songs', written 700 years before Christ was crucified, predicts his death and its meaning in astonishing detail:

*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)

In the same way, substitutionary atonement is equally the central teaching of the New Testament. Paul says that Jesus died ‘for us’ (Romans 5:8; 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’ (Mark 10:45). Peter says ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree’ (1 Peter 2:24), and ‘Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God’ (1 Peter 3:18).

God’s plan was to reconcile sinful humankind to himself through Jesus’ death on the cross. The Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – show in great detail how he achieved that. Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah through his teaching, actions, 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 28:16–20).

The mission of the church

The task of the church, and the role of all Christians, is thereby to be Jesus Christ’s witnesses by demonstrating the reality of God’s kingdom here and now and to call others through words and personal example to repentance, faith and full obedience (Matthew 28:19–20). Jesus’ death and resurrection provided the means of reconciliation. This wonderful gift is offered to everyone who will put their trust in him, believing and acting on his teaching and growing to full maturity as Christians. To all who receive Christ, he gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12). He gives them a new nature and the gift of his Holy

Spirit to live within them and enable them to understand his word and obey his commands (2 Corinthians 5:17). The first believers were Jewish but the gospel rapidly spread beyond Jewish borders as many Gentiles (non-Jews) were brought into God's kingdom. The church, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, is the vehicle through which all the nations of earth are to be blessed.

While on earth, Jesus prophesied that Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed and that the Jews would be scattered all over the world. In AD 70 this was fulfilled when the Romans destroyed the city and temple. But even more seriously, Jesus clearly taught that there would be a 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 Revelation, the final book of the Bible. The ultimate destiny of God's people is to live with God and each other forever with new perfect bodies in a world where there is no longer any death, mourning, crying or pain (2 Corinthians 5:1–10; Philippians 3:21–22; Revelation 21:1–5).

This then is the great biblical story – God's divine drama to rescue broken and rebellious people from their sin and restore us to a joyful and healthy relationship with himself and each other. It is essential that we first understand Christ's mission of salvation before we ask how medicine and health fit into it. During the course of this book we will refer back to this story, and unpack parts of it in more detail. Having found our bearings in this grand narrative and seen the trajectory on which all human history is headed, we are ready to set out and explore the big questions of the human journey.

And it all begins with: What does it mean to be human?

FURTHER READING

- Roberts V. *God's Big Picture*. IVP, 2002
- Stott J. *The Cross of Christ, 20th Anniversary Edition*. IVP, 2006