

JOSHUA M^CNALL

LONG
STORY
SHORT

THE BIBLE IN SIX
SIMPLE MOVEMENTS



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SIMPLE MOVEMENTS

JOSHUA M^CNALL



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For my father, Greg McNall

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PREFACE

Whatever you do, don't make it more academic!" This helpful statement was the only firm advice given by the folks at Seedbed as we first talked about revising and releasing the book that you now hold. I wrote much of it more than a decade ago for the people of my home church near Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the time, I was a young pastor fresh out of seminary, with no kids, and a full head of hair. Now I am a theology professor with four children and a bald spot caused by every aspect of this sentence. I love how life has changed for my wife, Brianna, and me in the past decade! Yet some of those changes have introduced the danger of taking something simple and making it too "academic."

I've tried to fight that impulse like the plague.

While this is a book about the Bible, it is *not* a book for scholars. In fact, if you are one of those, you should probably put it down right now. You will not like it. Instead, this is a book for all those regular folks for whom the Bible seems daunting or confusing. It is for all those people who have ever tried to understand the Scriptures but found the Bible intimidating, strange, or even offensive.

I've been there. In fact, some of us are scholars now because that strangeness lodged itself inside of us—like a fire in our bones. As a teenager, I rode home from church

camp each summer with a resolution etched within my mind (and probably within my hipster Moleskin journal). Amidst the camp speaker's annual challenge to remain pure, witness to the heathen football team, and avoid Metallica like my very soul depended on it, I would make myself a promise: *This year I will read my Bible! This year will be different! This year, I will start each morning in God's Word. I'll start in Genesis!*

And each year, near Leviticus, I'd fail.

Ever been there?

As a pastor's kid, I should have had an advantage in the Bible department. After all, I knew many parts by heart. Yet while I knew the stories of people like David, Samson, or Solomon, I didn't know the Big Story in which all those little narratives fit together. As I note later, it was a bit like having all the pieces to a puzzle without the glossy picture on the box top. My ignorance was no one's fault. But for whatever reason, the Bible struck me as mostly a collection of lessons or rules by which to live.

In the words of a terrible Christian song from the late '90s, it was the B.I.B.L.E.—“Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” As for such instructions, there was David on sexual (im)purity; the book of Acts for evangelizing the heathens (read: football players); and there were even some demon stories to rule out Metallica.

What more could you need?

Turns out, a lot.

While I've hardly had all my Bible questions answered over the years (sometimes I've just got new questions), I have been convinced that glimpsing the big picture of God's Story can help all the little stories

make more sense. Here's the one and only big idea for this book: when understood as a single plotline from beginning to end, Scripture comes alive, not just as rules or lessons, but as an unfolding drama that sucks us into the performance. As a story, it is without peer in all of human history. In fact, the Story *is* all of human history. It begins with creation and crescendos to a new creation that comes to heal our mess of sin and death.

In an age of biblical illiteracy (or sheer boredom), my goal is to take the Bible from a closed book to an open one. My approach, however, is not to fill your head with more information, but to awaken your imagination to the beauty of God's grand drama. In terms of content, this book introduces the Scriptures not as a complex list of rules or doctrines, but as a single Story—a script—in six simple movements: creation, the fall, Israel, Jesus, the church, and the new creation.

With this narrative in place, the reader will then (hopefully) begin to understand how all the little stories of the Bible fit together into a seamless whole. And what's more important, you will be compelled to step into the drama as a part of its performance.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find two things meant to help you: First, there will be a selection of Bible passages that you may want to read for yourself, to actually engage with the Story we've been sketching. Second, there will be some discussion questions that can be used to go deeper in a community. This type of relational reading is important, because as I argue, God's Story emerges *from* and *for* community. That is, human history itself comes forth *from* and *for* relationships of holy love (more on that in chapter 1).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My life has been blessed with many meaningful relationships. Thanks go first to my parents, Greg and Bonita McNall, who taught me about Jesus and his love. It was not their fault that I struggled to read the Bible for so long. Rather it was their “fault” that I wanted to read it at all. The original manuscript for this book was dedicated to my dad—and so is this one. The reason is a simple one: some men write better stories with their lives than can be published with word processors. I love you, Dad.

Thanks go also to my teachers. I’ve been blessed, over the years, to learn from some fantastic educators, whether in college, seminary, or PhD work. Such relationships have shown me yet another reason Jesus was called “Rabbi.” Teachers matter. And in my own life, these men and women helped ignite in me a love of learning, reading, and good questions. So while any errors in this volume are mine alone, the book would not exist without my “Rabbis.”

In the notes, there are pointers to more detailed sources that have helped me over the years. The Bible scholar N. T. Wright bulks large among these resources. As do others for whom “academic” is not a shame word.

Thanks also to my good friend Chad McCallum (the would-be “stand-up comedian” from chapter 5).

I was serving under Chad's leadership as his assistant pastor when I first wrote these chapters. Among other things, he showed me that ministry can be fun as well as faithful, and that humor can be a conduit to the Christlike transformation.

Finally, my deepest (earthly) debt of love goes to Brianna. She is a better wife than I could have ever hoped for; and I'm thankful every day that I asked her to marry me. We were just newlyweds when I first wrote this book. Now we have four children, who, in their best aspects, take after her: Lucy, Penelope, Ewan, and Teddy. Dad loves you kids too! I hope that someday you read this book and catch a glimpse of God's Father-love that puts even mine to shame.

Now, without any further ado, let me tell you a story.

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INTRODUCTION

Why You Should Stop Reading

I've been told by people older and wiser than myself that the purpose of writing a proper introduction is to convince more finicky readers that they should in fact *keep reading*. This is important. I am supposed to grab you by the collar and convince you that somewhere, perhaps on the bottom of page 137, there is an insight so profound that it will simultaneously bless your soul, cure your psoriasis, and reverse male pattern baldness.

Let me be clear: there is no magic insight. Still, I tried at first to write that kind of introduction. I tried to *sell it*. But in the end, I always came off feeling like the old guy on those late-night infomercials—the one with the spray tan—who sells electric food dehydrators. “This book will revolutionize your life!” I’d say. “Now taste the beef jerky!”

So rather than tell you why you should keep reading, let’s say we take the opposite approach. Imagine (for a moment) that you’ve *stopped* reading. That’s right.

Envision for a second that someone waved an old-fashioned pocket watch in front of your face and uttered a cheesy hypnotic phrase with the inflection of a yoga teacher: “You are not reading . . . there are no words; no letters; no pages pinched between your fingertips. You are not reading. *You are walking.*”

Imagine now that you are walking between the towering shelves of an ancient library. Where you come from, libraries are not exactly places to write home about. But this space is different. The room is incredible. It’s the kind of space that camera-toting tourists pay five bucks apiece to gawk at; or in which you might expect to see a sign for the “Hogwarts Reunion, Class of 1998.” Above you, shafts of natural light spill in through the colored glass of gothic windows. Overhead, the vaulted ceilings remind you of cathedrals you have seen in pictures. But this is not a house of worship. At least not now. The building itself seems centuries old, but the books seem even older. As you walk between the wooden shelves, bound pages smell of mildew and far-off places.

Then as you are walking, suddenly your eye is caught by a single spine from a single volume. On the surface, there is no reason to notice this book more than others. There is nothing extraordinary about its size or color. Still it catches your attention. After pausing for a moment, you stretch on tiptoes to retrieve the dusty volume. You grasp it, turn it over, and scan the front for some kind of title. Nothing. There’s no proper introduction, either.

What you find instead, inside the tattered binding, is something else entirely. There, tucked inside the leather

cover is what appears to be a kind of label. It simply reads: *The Book*.

“The Book?” you ask.

It is, you suppose, an accurate description. But couldn't the author be just a bit more specific. After all, how did he expect to *sell it*? The whole thing seems strange. Then again, being somewhat strange yourself, you make a snap decision. You tuck the mystery book under your arm and proceed to check it out.

Now you *are* reading.

In a Starbucks around the corner, you leaf through the tattered pages. *What is this thing?* you wonder. But the reading hardly eliminates the questions. Between the moth-eaten covers is an odd assortment of poems, biographies, genealogies, and legal minutia, all *smooshed* together in a single binding. The variety suggests that this is actually a *combination* of several books—with different authors, agendas, and historical contexts. It's a hodge-podge. It's a mash-up. And while some parts are understandable enough, others are downright baffling. Still, it does have all the stuff that makes for a good movie: violence, sex, even a talking animal near the beginning.

Later, however, as you begin to spend more time within the musty pages, you begin to perceive what one could not have noticed at first glance. Despite different topics and styles of writing, you begin to glimpse what appears to be a *single story* running through the pages, like a river through the forest. This plotline is like a long, thin thread that ties all the parts together: a single narrative. It is illumined in different ways, to be sure, by different authors, and through different genres, but

it is visible nonetheless. There is a single history from beginning to end. It takes some time to see it, but it is there—a story—from start to finish.

As in all great stories, there is a beginning. There are key characters. There are false hopes, foils, twists of plot, and twists of fate. There is a climax. There is a hero. And as with all great stories, there is an ending which both *does* and *does not* bring the resolution you've been waiting for. Were they leaving room for a final installment? And it is now that a peculiar realization hits you: perhaps this is a book worth reading.

Now stop imagining.

The Book

Everything that follows is an attempt to answer just one question: *What if the Christian Scriptures are a bit like this imaginary volume in this imaginary library?*

Literally translated, “the Bible” simply means “the books.”¹ That’s it. We may wish it were something more profound or creative, but it’s not. The Bible is first and foremost a collection of different books, written by different authors, in a time and culture immensely different from our own. The Bible is different. And, in the end, all these differences lead us to an inevitable conclusion: when compared to almost everything else we read—from *Rolling Stone* to *Robinson Crusoe*—the Bible is rather odd.

The Bible is strange. We avoid saying such things in the hope of sounding smart or respectful, but it doesn’t change the fact. The book is an anomaly in our modern world. It is published and purchased like clockwork, but

it is read and understood more rarely. The Scriptures have a foreignness about them. They have an ancient quality that draws us, convicts us, and then leaves us with questions. The Bible is different. And if it doesn't strike you that way, then it may be because you haven't taken time to really read it. Don't think so? Try starting in the Old Testament book of Judges. That should do the trick.

The Bible is also challenging. And for this reason, much ink is spilled each year in an effort to take what it actually *says* and transform it into something more palatable to our modern taste buds. We like practical insights and seven-step formulas. As a local radio station touts, we like "positive and encouraging hits—safe for the whole family." We like greeting cards, so we turn the Bible into one.

But consider for a moment if all this well-intentioned *distilling* and *formulizing* were actually having an unintended consequence. Imagine if by constantly analyzing the individual pieces of the jigsaw puzzle we somehow forgot to take a look at the beautiful picture on the front of the box.²

To be blunt, that is precisely what sometimes happens in the church. A brief trip to any Christian bookstore will reveal dozens of studies on particular *topics* within the Bible. You can read about marriage, dating, finances, spiritual gifts, even biblical dieting (whatever that is).

There are also dozens of helpful studies on specific *texts* within the Bible. You can do a study on the book of James or John or Acts. But aside from all these topical and textual studies, there are fewer resources that

provide a snapshot of the big picture on the front of the box. There are fewer resources available that give a simple telling of the plotline from beginning to end. The book I've written is not for scholars. And while I am an academic, my hope is that you will not notice that too much while reading. It is a book for the church, just as the Bible is. It is for people who find the Bible confusing, strange, or even scary. It is a book for those students in my New Testament classes who have never read the Scriptures, and who need some help believing that they should even try. This book is for you. It is a glimpse of God's long Story (in the Scriptures) made short—or at least shorter.

Thankfully, the Bible is *not* primarily a collection of disembodied truths. It is not primarily a cosmic rule book, an anthology of practical insights, or a five-step path toward psychological fulfillment. The Bible is primarily a story—and it reveals for us the remarkable narrative of God's work within our world.

Our question then is simple: What are the basic *chapters* in this plotline? What are the basic stages in the drama? What are the essential twists and turns? And why should these details matter to any of us?

Why Bother?

This last question is the most important one. Why should the narrative of the Bible matter to anyone today? Why bother with people and places whose names are all but impossible to pronounce? I mean really, Jehoshaphat?

Why not stick with our formulas, our simple lists of dos and don'ts, and our prepackaged devotional insights? Why bother delving into the violent and murky memories of ancient history? "Enough with the minutia!" you say. "Get to the point!"

Fair enough.

The point is simple. The biblical plotline ought to matter to us because we all play a part in it, whether we like it or not. We ought to know the Big Story of Scripture because whether we are aware of it or not, we are living in a chapter of that Story now. We inhabit it—with people whose names and hometowns we know well. We need to know the overarching narrative of Scripture because *this Story* is *our story*. And to live wisely in our chapter, we must know the chapters that precede and follow our own.

To use a metaphor from the theater: if we are to know how to act in this scene, we must know the scenes that have come before. To play our part in God's drama, we must know how the plot has unfolded up to now. And we must know how the play will end. Is it comedy or tragedy? Who is the hero? Who is the villain? In short: if we are to act well, we must know the script—and the script is Scripture.³

The answer to the why is, therefore, not that complicated: we must know the story of Scripture because we are all characters in it. We can be heroes or villains, mere extras or key players, good or bad actors. We must know the story because it is the story of human history—it is our story—and we have a share in how it ends.

Chapters in the Plotline

To get to know the Story we are part of, we will break down the biblical narrative into six chapters.

We'll start in the beginning with creation. We'll move second to what Christians call the fall. (The Story takes a nasty turn here.) We'll spend a third chapter exploring the beginning of God's rescue operation through a people called Israel. Then, we'll see the rescue climax in a person named Jesus. Next, we'll discover what it means to follow Jesus as part of his church. And, finally, we'll see how the Story comes full circle—and then some—in a beautiful and surprising event called the new creation.⁴

These chapters will constitute our plotline—God's long Story made short. And for those who like their ideas in bullet points, here they are again:

- Creation
- Fall
- Israel
- Jesus
- Church
- New Creation

It's not important if these headings mean little to you now. Think of this as merely a table of contents. Each chapter indicates a different scene within the human drama, but they are all connected. No part of the play will make much sense without the others. Incidentally, this may be one reason why the Bible has failed to connect with you in the past. Without glimpsing the big picture

on the front of the box, it is difficult to see how the little pieces fit together.

Likewise, when you begin to grasp how these stages in the drama come together, you may find that the strange parts of Scripture make more sense. (Not entirely, mind you, since all great tales resist our taming.) And, in reading, you may find that some religious assumptions that you've held for years actually have little to do with God's Story. And you may find that you are able to open the Bible to almost any place and know quite quickly which chapter you are reading. You will begin to grasp why God did something way back then, and why it has ramifications for us now.

And, most important, you may begin to see God more clearly for who he really is. He is not merely a cosmic school master handing down rules and regulations. He is not the divine equivalent of a motivational speaker, peddling buttery inspiration like *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. He is not a heavenly Santa Claus, a spiritual buddy, or a complete mystery that seeks only to baffle us.

God is more. He is an artist, a creator, and in many ways, a writer. He is the composer of the most beautiful and terrible love story that the world has ever known. In its own way, the Bible is Shakespeare with soul. It is Homer on truth serum. It is Hemingway shot through with hope. In its pages, we glimpse the Big Story of human history, and with each passing second, we move closer to the final chapter. This is God as Writer-Redeemer, the author of history who steps into the plotline to rescue the tale from sure disaster. *This* is a God worth paying attention to. Yet we glimpse this

Creator-God only when we begin to find in the ancient words of our mysterious *book* the most incredible script to have ever been penned. The script is Scripture; it's God's Story, and it's worth reading.

1

CREATION

Why Sugar Momma Had to Die

Back in my school days, I read a story about some people in a place called Babylon. It was a tale about creation, and it explained how this ancient culture believed that the earth, the universe, and human beings all came to be.

It started with a *fight*.

According to the Babylonians, the struggle was between the gods. I couldn't help but notice that it ended like a lot of human fights I've seen. That is, it ended in a bloody mess. In this creation story, there were two main characters: one called Tiamat (I will refer to her as "Sugar Momma") and another called Marduk. Tiamat was a mother goddess, and she had a son named Kingu.

The story didn't say so, but apparently Kingu was an only child because his mother liked to dote on him even more than usual. She liked it so much, in fact, that one

day Sugar Momma went so far as to name her golden boy as the undisputed boss of all the other deities. Stop me if you've heard this one before. She even held a ceremony. Picture an over-the-top suburban sweet sixteen.

Unfortunately, as it often does with spoiled children, the parental favoritism didn't sit too well with all the other gods. They didn't like Kingu. They thought he was a punk. And they decided to do something. After some heated discussion, a rival god was chosen. He would face Tiamat and he would tell Sugar Momma to stop playing favorites, or else. The rival god they found was Marduk. Cue the *Rocky* theme music.

Trouble ensued.

In what sounds like a Babylonian royal rumble, there was a showdown between the deities. They fought, and it was messy. As the story goes, at the end of the brawl both Sugar Momma and her golden boy lay dead. But in case you thought that was the end, it's not. Things were just getting interesting. (Remember, the story is about *creation*.) After Marduk murdered his rivals, he wasn't finished with them. In a gory fit of creativity, he decided to *make something* from the remains of his slain foes. According to the Babylonians, he created the earth from the mangled scraps of Tiamat, and human beings from the bloody corpse of Kingu.¹ Somewhere, Quentin Tarantino proclaimed that "it was good."

Creation from Conflict

This may seem like an odd way to begin a chapter on creation, but upon reading this grotesque old story I had a

slightly different reaction than you might expect. That is, I thought it sounded pretty normal. Because, in some ways, conflict is a pretty standard description of the way it goes when new things are created. Stay with me. What I mean is, when you think about it, creativity is almost always *fueled* by struggle, adversity, suffering, and tension.

It's that way in business. Two executives disagree about the best way to make an app (or whatever). Trouble ensues. Things get tense. And before long one person decides to go on her own and do things differently. A new company is born, and new products flood the market. It's creation, from conflict.

It's that way with nations too. Country A passes a law that says certain people far away have to pay high taxes on their tea. Certain people are *not* pleased. In fact, some folks actually go so far as to throw said tea into the local harbor. Trouble ensues. Things get tense. And, before you know it, there are two countries where there used to be one. It's creation, from conflict. (Word to the wise: never mess with people's tea.)

It's that way in music too. A young and talented musician feels that his parents' music fails to connect with the way he sees the world. It hems him in. It's too restrictive. A struggle ensues, and in a fit of creativity, Young and Talented Musician grabs an instrument and breaks all the rules. (I'm referring of course to Mozart. Or maybe Kurt Cobain. Or any musician that really matters.) It's creation out of conflict.

The same principle holds true in science and sports, art and architecture, and pretty much everything in between. Creation is almost always *fueled* by conflict.

This is especially true when we begin to study the various creation stories floating around the ancient and modern world. Biblical scholars tell us that perhaps the *most unique* element of the Jewish-Christian account of origins is its complete and utter lack of conflict. There are other unique features, of course. But this one really sets our narrative apart. Virtually every other ancient (or modern) creation story involves some sort of violent or sexual conflict.

Consider also the big bang theory—at least when it is divorced from some benevolent oversight. To put it crudely, scientists tell us that the bang is merely a metaphor used to describe an intense reaction that occurred when multiple cosmic gases, well . . . interacted violently. As the story goes, the gasses conflicted, reacted, and *bang!* The universe was made (much like Tiamat and golden boy's remains).

Come to think of it, maybe the Babylonian story isn't as unique as one might think. (At least, minus the particulars about divine disembowelment.) If we are honest, it sometimes seems that violence has been stitched into the eternal fabric of the universe. It governs the animal kingdom and it blankets the cable news networks. Nature, as they say, is "red in tooth and claw." Tarantino has reason to be smiling.

Creation from and for Communion

So what would a more *original* creation story look like? Where would it begin if not with conflict? Well, if you believe the Scriptures, a more original story of creation

would start with something many of us have only experienced in passing. A truly original story of creation would start with perfect, loving community. Now *that* would be subversive.

The creation chapter in *God's Story* is an attempt to open our minds to the possibility that there is indeed another story out there—a more beautiful story—and one that rings truer. We find it in the Scriptures. What we discover, when we read the Bible carefully, is that the universe emerges not from violent or sexual conflict, not from the clash of volatile personalities or volatile gases, but *from* and *for* community.

In the Bible, everything from anteaters to jellyfish, waterfalls to water buffaloes, sunsets to supernovas—*everything* emerges *from* and *for* persons in loving relationship. This is the classic Christian doctrine of creation. But it is also the doctrine of the Trinity. Our universe came into being *from* a God who *is* communion (Father, Son, and Spirit). And it emerges *for* persons (both divine and human) who will live together with that same concern for one another. This is the picture of creation that we'll be examining. But first, to more weighty matters.

In the Refrigerator

Few know it, but I was recently diagnosed with a fairly serious medical condition. There is probably a fancy Latin name for it, but the reality is that I am a chronic *loser*. That's right. I have a condition that forces me to lose things, especially car keys—and as far as I can tell, there is no cure.

Because of this obscure condition, I have been required, like some of you, to develop a kind of search-and-rescue procedure that kicks in whenever I leave home. It's basically a protocol that covers all the places that I typically set down the car keys. I start with the one place they are supposed to be: the key hook by the door. *After all, I think, we put that hook there for a purpose.* It would make sense for them to be there. It's logical. But they aren't. They never are.

So I proceed next to a number of other logical locations. I check the dresser, the counter, the sofa, the pocket of a discarded pair of pants. And sometimes this yields results. But sometimes it doesn't. Because I have a *condition*.

And it's in such instances that I am forced to get more creative. I was in one of these situations the other day when I remembered something that gave me hope. I remembered my sandwich. More specifically, I remembered *making* my sandwich, which required mayonnaise. And because my wife, Brianna, isn't fond of food poisoning, we usually keep the mayonnaise in the fridge. So it was, in the end, that I opened the refrigerator to find what I had been searching for: my car keys, between the bologna and the carrot sticks.

Beginning an exploration of creation by looking to the Old Testament book of Job (pronounced: "Jobe") may seem as wise as beginning a search for the car keys by looking in the refrigerator. Why go there? Yet in the Scriptures, as in life, we sometimes find what we're looking for in the strangest of places. In Job's world, creation and community have been shattered. His life has

been rocked by events beyond his control. And he is the victim of suffering that he did not bring upon himself. Without warning, his universe is torn apart by sickness, death, fair-weather friends, a natural disaster—and if all that isn't bad enough—a nagging wife who wants him dead.² It's a bad day.

Yet what God gives Job in the middle of all this pain is not at all what we'd expect. He doesn't give him a philosophical answer to the problem of evil—not at all. He doesn't tell Job *why* bad things happen. He doesn't even bend down to whisper that God loves him and has a wonderful plan for his life. Instead, what God gives to Job in his moment of need is an oratorical slap in the face, accompanied by a dizzying picture of *creation*. It's strange. In Job's moment of deep personal tragedy, the Creator sidesteps words of comfort, and instead launches immediately into an ear-splitting retelling of the first chapter in the Bible's plotline. Why is that?

Singing Stars and Shouting Angels

When we pick up the episode, Job is loudly questioning the justice of God. "Something must be wrong up there!" he screams. "I've done nothing to deserve all this!" (And he's correct.) Still it's not Job's question, but God's response, that startles us. Instead of comforting Job with a warm embrace or a cold beer, God asks him a question, and it's a pointed one: *Where were you? Where were you, Job, when I created all of this? Surely you can tell me! What were you doing on the day I formed the universe? Where were you?* (To be honest, this is a little like asking

most of us where we were the last time the Whig party won the White House. Answer: Uh . . . I wasn't.) God asks Job this question but he doesn't even give him time to answer. Instead, he paints Job a picture, and tells him a story. It's a picture of creation and a story of communal celebration.

In a moment of anger and suffering, God grasps Job by the collar and gives him the only thing that will quiet him long enough to trust him through the pain. It's not a greeting card cliché or a Sunday school answer. It's a ringside seat to the bowel-shaking formation of the heavens and the earth.

In a free-verse poetic smackdown, God gives Job a whirlwind tour of how he crafted the most intricate features of the cosmos. He tells him how he subdued the seas, hung the heavens, counted clouds, and on and on it goes. It is beautiful, frightening, awe-inspiring stuff. Shakespeare would salivate. You should read it.

And right in the middle of these poetic verses, there is one line that tells us something about the context out of which our story begins. It is a brief line, not even a full sentence, but it reveals for us a scene of celebration and community that lies at the very heart of the universe. Here, God explains to Job that while he effortlessly set the galaxies to spinning, something else was happening too. *He wasn't alone*. Rather, at the very moment of unveiling: "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7).

If this verse strikes us as strange, it may be because when we picture God creating the heavens and the earth (if we even can), we sometimes picture a solitary old man

with a beard—who may or may not sound like Morgan Freeman—calling people and animals into being so that he can have someone to hang out with. Maybe God was lonely, we think, so he made us. But the Scriptures tell a different story: In the Scriptures, it is not creation out of loneliness, or creation out of conflict. In the Scriptures, it is always creation from community. It's creation as a party. Stars sing in harmony. Angels shout for joy. It's a raucous affair.

Of course, we could easily dismiss such words as mere poetic metaphors. "After all," says Captain Obvious, "stars don't sing." Perhaps not. But even metaphors are meant to point at truth.

God is saying something to Job, and it is something unique among the dozens of other creation stories in the world. To a man whose life is fractured and fragmented, God delivers a clear message. *The story doesn't start that way!* The story starts with perfect, beautiful community.

Perhaps you need to hear that too. The story of creation is not the tale of a lonely deity looking for companionship. God wasn't gloomily reading the personal ads when he crafted the galaxies. Creation is not the tale of a friendless old man who made the universe because he needed some people to talk to. Nor is it the violent story of angry gods and goddesses fighting and fornicating for control of the cosmos. It didn't happen by accident. Creation is the story of an Artist effortlessly sculpting the universe amid a chorus of thankful celebration. The universe was born amid a party: stars singing, angels shouting. It was the opposite of violent conflict. It was creation *from* community.

Such party imagery also points to another crucial truth: the unabashed goodness of the (physical) world that God made. While some might see the material realm as kind of shabby and secondary compared to spiritual or intellectual realities, the Bible does not take this view. Not at all. In the Scriptures, the physical world is very good. It is meant to be the receptacle (or better yet, a temple) that would contain the very presence of God.³ And as we will later see, the physical realm is so far from being inherently evil that God can even take up flesh within it in the person of Jesus Christ without becoming “gross” or “sinful.” Yes, things have been broken now by sin, but this underlying goodness is important to remember when it comes time to think about the sacredness of things like our physical bodies, God’s gift of human sexuality, and the way we ought to steward the material world that God has given us. Even in the book of Job, the singing stars and shouting angels speak to the inherent goodness of God’s creation.

But what good is this to Job? After all, the reality for him was that he had lost everything! Who cares if God told a thundering story about the way the world began?! It’s a fair point. But before heading too far down this path, perhaps we should notice Job’s response. The Bible says that after hearing from God, *Job worshipped*. Right there in the middle of the loss and the hurt and the million questions left unanswered, Job worshipped his Creator. Why?

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that glimpsing the way the story *starts* gives us hope for the way it will *end*. Despite appearances to the contrary, God is on the throne, and this world did not come into being

by a random explosion of cosmic gas or cosmic rage. We need to hear that sometimes. Things may be difficult now. Things may be terrible. But the story didn't start that way. And the message of the Creator is that it won't end that way either: not for Job, and not for us.

Logos

So creation started with a party. It began with an eruption of purposeful joy. But what else should we know?

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John fills in another detail for us. Apparently stars and angels were not the first to join the party. They were fashionably late. Because not even they were there in the (very) beginning. John says it this way:

In the beginning was the [*logos*], and the [*logos*] was with God, and the [*logos*] was God . . . Through him [that is, the *logos*] all things were made. (John 1:1-3)

Which is nice, I guess. But *what* is a *logos*?

Just a few lines further in John's book we learn the strange and intriguing truth toward which the entire Bible points with wonder. This *logos*, or "Word" (as it's translated), comes to us as a first-century Jew named Jesus. The Word is a man, is God, is Jesus. If this seems confusing to you, then you can join twenty centuries of Christians trying to wrap their minds around a person who defies *all* our categories.

Creation from community, John tells us, is not just about stars and angels cheering (metaphorically

or otherwise) from the balcony. It's not about created spectators to divine pyrotechnics. It goes much deeper. Creation from community, John tells us, is about a God with room within himself for perfect communion. Jesus (the *logos*) was *with* God; he was *in* God, and he actually *was God* from the eternal beginning. Everything was made through him.

Say goodbye, John says, to your images of a lonely old man with a beard. Say goodbye to a Morgan Freeman deity. This God not only *likes* community, this God *is* community.⁴ But it gets better.

From John to Genesis

A quick turn from John to Genesis shows another figure—a third figure—who shares in the eternal life of God in the beginning. The first paragraph of the Bible hints at this. It says that in the beginning: “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Gen. 1:2).

At this point, the earth is depicted as chaotic and empty. Yet there is something—no, someone—hovering just above the fray. This someone is the Spirit of God, and the Spirit has a part in creation also.

In the Hebrew language (and the Greek for that matter) the word for Spirit is the same as that for breath—Spirit. Creation, then, is what happens when *Breath* gives voice to *Word*. It's a metaphor. Yet it points to truth. The Spirit hovers, waiting. The Word is with God, waiting. And then it happens. A voice says: “Let there be light,” and there is (Gen. 1:30). Creation happens when God *speaks*. This metaphor is fascinating,

in part, because when we speak, at least a couple things are necessary. We must have breath. And we must form words. It's a cooperative effort that flows forth from a single being. This is how the Bible views creation: God *speaks* the world into existence with wind and words, language and lungfuls, *Spirit* and *Logos*.

God is one. Yet there is relationship within him too: creation *from* community. Instead of a lonely old man, we see a united, three-fold cooperation. And if you had time to reflect upon this three-part harmony—say, for centuries—you might end up referring to it as a kind of triple-unity. A tri-unity. A Trinity.

It is all too much to wrap your mind around, but the main idea is surprisingly simple: creation in the Bible emerges neither from conflict (see Sugar Momma's bloody corpse), nor from a lonely old man in the sky. Creation comes forth from a unified and loving relationship. And this divine communion gives birth to a human one.

Enter Actors

In Genesis 2, God makes a person: Adam. But even in a sin-free world, Adam doesn't do well by himself. Something is missing. So God says this:

"It is not good for the man to be alone." . . . So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought

her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Gen. 2:18, 21–25)

That last line is my favorite. They were naked, and they felt no shame. Another Christian writer observes that the more you read this passage, the more you begin to understand that “nudity is the point.”⁵ I think he’s right, but we’ll come back to that thought in a minute.

Aside from the odd reference to nudity, the first thing that jumps out is that despite the goodness of creation, there is one thing that *isn’t* good. To quote the immortal words of *Sesame Street*, “one of these things is *not* like the others . . . one of these things just doesn’t belong.”

In the midst of this *good* creation, God spots Adam sitting between a baboon and a butternut squash, and he says emphatically: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” I have probably heard this verse a hundred times, but for a long time I never fully grasped its meaning.

Lessons from the Hospital

Not long ago, my wife and I were called to the hospital to see some friends that have been especially close to us. This couple, a loving husband and wife, had recently made the long drive to be at our wedding. And in this case, they had driven again to visit their children in college. During this visit, they had gone for a walk. They

were holding hands. And as they stepped into a cross-walk, both were slammed by an out-of-control vehicle. She was killed. He broke a leg.

It was gut-wrenching. Soon after, Brianna and I sat with the family in the hospital. During that time, I overheard someone say that in the accident the husband's eye glasses had been flung wildly across the pavement. The next day, someone realized the glasses were missing. So one of the sons went to see if he could find them. Incredibly, he did. The fragile wire frames had been thrown to the side of the road where they sat all day and night with cars and trucks and bicycles rumbling past them. Amazingly, they were still in decent shape. A little bent, but not unwearable.

A while later, I remember someone talking about the glasses and commenting about how *fortunate* the husband was to get them back. Somehow, the discovery struck me differently. I fumed at God with Job-like questions: Why, in all his grand omnipotence, had God seen fit to preserve a pair of glasses, while letting a precious woman die just feet away? It seemed random and stupid. It still does. Not all stories end with greeting card clichés.

We left the hospital soon after. But just before the husband went to surgery, I watched as another friend bent down close to speak with him. "Can you tell me what you're most afraid of?" he asked. The response was brief but penetrating: "being alone."

It is not good for man to be alone.

At the beginning of the Bible, God looks upon loneliness and gives his unvarnished opinion: it is *contra Deum* (against God, and against his will). To the go-at-it-alone

existence that we sometimes admire in America, God shouts words of exorcism: “Get out! You do not belong!” As human beings, we were not only created *from* community (Father, Son, and Spirit), we were created *for* community. We were created to do life together—with God and with each other—so Adam gets a soul mate. And she’s naked too.

Naked without Shame

Back in junior high I used to have strange nightmares. In some of these, I would show up to school, and about halfway through geometry, a strange question would begin to formulate: *I wonder if I’m wearing pants?*

And, of course, in my dream, I was not. So for the rest of the class I tried to conceal the fact that I was naked. Normally this would seem ridiculous, but in my dreams things like that don’t seem to occur to me. In my dream-logic, I think that if I can position my textbook just right *maybe* no one will notice. But they always do. Dreams are cruel that way.

That’s the thing about nakedness: it often comes with a side of shame. It’s why interrogators have been known to strip their prisoners. It’s why robbing someone of their clothes is a way of robbing them of their dignity. But apparently it did not start that way. Genesis says that the man and the woman were naked, yet they felt no shame. By way of definition, it is sometimes said that we feel guilt for things we’ve *done*, yet we feel shame for who we *are* at some deep level. While guilt may have

positive aspects (like driving us toward repentance and change), shame is more insidious. Shame is destructive because it can destroy the very engine and ability to make changes.⁶ In the beginning, humans had no word for shame, and thus, no word for clothes. Which is strange, but also rather nice.

The reason has something to do with the way deep communion was always meant to function. We were meant to experience relationships with God, people, and our world without pretense, without makeup, and without shame. That's what "naked community" (now speaking metaphorically) is all about.

If we have a hard time imagining this kind of community, it is probably because we have grown up in a world where getting naked (both literally and metaphorically) is always risky. I'll say that again. It is *always* risky. There is always a chance that someone will point and laugh, take advantage, or be unfaithful. In our fallen context, there is always a chance that someone will judge, exploit, betray, belittle, or just grow bored when they see us for who we really are. In our world, being naked carries risks—as some of you will know quite painfully. Thus the nightmares.

Naked Communion

What we see in Scripture—in books like Job, John, and Genesis—is that when God's Story began, things were different. At the end of the beginning, the image we have is that of two people, standing naked, completely open,

completely known, and yet completely unashamed. This is about far more than just a lack of clothing. It is about a kind of living that allows others to see us for who we are, without judgment or fear.

A writer named Paul speaks in the New Testament of how this existence has been fractured. In poetic terms, Paul comes back to the theme of naked unhidden community. As of now, he says, we *know* God and other people only in part. As of now, there are parts of us we hide. There are parts we fake. And there are parts we don't even understand ourselves. We hurt those we care about. We lower our gaze to avoid the eyes of a stranger. Our loves are real but fractured, and we feel it in our bones. Things are not as they ought to be. We *know* in part.

Why is this?

Why are even beautiful things now broken? That is a subject for chapter 2. For now, though, Paul wants to reassure us that a day is coming when creation-style community will make a roaring comeback. This fractured world will be restored. And the result of this will be a kind of naked, unashamed knowing that we can only dream about. We will know in full, even as we are fully known (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). Community will rally.

As Christians we believe this, in part, because our story does not begin with conflict. Conflict may lie at the heart of other theories on creation. It may be the reason why Sugar Momma had to die. But our story is different. Our plotline emerges *from* and *for* loving relationships. We come *from* and *for* communion.

Engage the Story

Having read about the creation chapter in God's Story, it's time now to engage with it yourself. Read the following passages this week, reflect upon their meaning, and be prepared to discuss them with others. Keep in mind that each passage sheds light upon God's character as the Creator in different ways.

- Genesis 1–2
- Psalm 8
- John 1:1–14
- Acts 17:24–28
- Colossians 1:15–20

Discuss the Story

1. In this chapter, we saw that the biblical origins story is unique among other ancient (and modern) options because it centers *not* on creation from conflict, but rather creation from and for community. Reread the following statement from the chapter and discuss the questions below.

What we discover, when we read the Scriptures carefully, is that the universe emerges not from violent or sexual conflict, not from the clash of volatile personalities or volatile cosmic gases, but *from* and *for* community.

- Have you ever thought about the biblical origins story as being unique in this way?

- What are some implications of having a view of the world that originates in loving community rather than violent conflict?
2. Use the following statement to discuss the questions below:

The story of creation is not the tale of a lonely deity looking for companionship. God wasn't reading the personal ads when he crafted the galaxies. The Creator did not make the universe because he needed some interesting people to hang out with.

- Do you think that it is still common for people to picture God as a solitary old man in the sky?
 - What is wrong with this perspective and how does this explanation of the Trinity change the discussion?
3. When Job's life was falling apart, God didn't give him an answer to the problem of pain, but a picture of creation. Read the following statement and discuss the questions below:

In a moment of anger and suffering, God grasps Job by the collar and gives him the only thing that will quiet him long enough to trust him through the pain. It's not a greeting card cliché or a Sunday school answer. It is a ringside seat to the bowel-shaking formation of the heavens and the earth.

- At what point in your own life have you felt a bit like Job? Have you ever experienced a deep loss of community and hope?

- Why do you think God answered Job's complaint in this way?
4. Read Genesis 2:18–25 together and respond to the statement below:

From the very beginning, God looks on loneliness and gives his honest opinion: it is not good. To the go-it-alone existence that we sometimes admire in America, God all but shouts: You don't belong here! Not here! Not now! Not good! And he says this, I think, because as human beings we were not only created *from* community (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), we were created *for* community. We were created to do life together.

- Do you think our culture looks highly upon individuals who *go it alone*?
 - Recall the story of the man who lost his wife. Comment on a time in your own life when it sunk in for you that it is *not good* to be alone.
 - Take a moment to consider the people whom God has brought into your life to enrich it. What have these communal relationships meant to you?
5. Read the statement below and then discuss the questions that follow:

At the end of the creation chapter in God's Story, the image we are left with is that of two people, standing naked, completely open, completely known, and yet completely unashamed. However you interpret this, one thing is certain: it is about much more than just a lack of clothing. It is about a kind of living

that allows others to see us for who we are, without judgment, ridicule, or fear.

- Without snickering, comment on the importance of the phrase you just read in Genesis: “they were naked without shame.”
 - Why is this phrase a metaphorical description of true community?
6. Having read the first chapter in God’s plotline (creation *from* and *for* community), reflect on these issues in your own life over the next week:
- Am I living in meaningful community right now?
 - Are there people in my life who know me well enough to ask me how I’m doing, and really mean it?
 - Am I connected to a Jesus community (a.k.a. “a church”) in ways that reveal my true belief that our story begins with persons in loving relationships?
 - What is the one thing that I can do this week to pursue a life of community both with the Creator, and with other people?