

TELLING GOD'S STORY

A PARENTS' GUIDE TO TEACHING THE BIBLE

PETER ENNS



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*For Sue
Mother, Teacher, Fellow Pilgrim*



*For Erich, Elizabeth, and Sophie
Still on the journey*

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P R E F A C E

This book introduces parents and teachers to a new philosophy of teaching the Bible. My intent is to give you an overall vision for what the Bible is (and is not), and what it means to read and understand it. My goal is that this will help you teach the Bible faithfully, powerfully, and with joy to your children.

It has been my experience, as a biblical scholar, seminary professor, and parent of three nearly adult children—whom my wife, Sue, homeschooled for part of their secondary school education—that there is a big gap between what children tend to learn about the Bible in the early years, and how Scripture is studied in later years, as children mature into adults. For this reason, I have felt for many years that a different approach to the Bible is needed.

In this introductory volume to studying the Bible, I propose focusing on what the Bible *as a whole* is about, rather than zeroing in on individual Bible stories or snippets of moral teaching taken out of context. This approach introduces young students to the big picture, encouraging them to understand the entire biblical story—as, I believe, it is intended to be understood.

The goal for this kind of approach is to prepare young Christians to have a vibrant faith in God and trust in Scripture in a world that is changing more quickly than we can describe. The chapters that follow will address these two main issues, and others, in more detail.

Telling God's Story stands on its own, as a proposal for a thoughtful, thorough approach to teaching the Bible. But it also acts as the

introductory volume for a fully developed curriculum, complete with scripted lessons, activities, and lesson plans. For more on the *Telling God's Story* curriculum, visit olivebranchbooks.net.

I hope that the pattern laid out here will help you develop a real sense of purpose and excitement at the prospect of teaching your children the Christian faith to which our Scripture bears witness. God's word is meant to be taught by faithful parents (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Proverbs 1:8; 2 Timothy 1:5). This book is intended to aid in that process.

Pete Enns, PhD
Lansdale, PA

— Chapter One —

Laws About Mildew and Dragons With Crowns

Why the Bible is such a difficult book to teach

Throughout their teenage years, all three of my children have had issues with keeping their rooms even remotely presentable. (One child in particular comes to mind. You know who you are.)

As any parent of teenagers can attest, the dialogue is predictable: “I can’t see the floor.” “You need dynamite to get from one end of the room to the other.” “How can you *live* in this mess?” “I could torch half the clothes on the floor and you wouldn’t even miss them.” “You kids today; when *I* was your age. . . .”

This has been going on for years, and it gets us nowhere.

Finally, the child with the particular issue and I decided that the main reason for the mess was that there was no good place for organizing clothes. I suddenly saw a ray of hope. I grabbed my keys, hopped in the car, and bought a closet organizing system (a bit pricey, but in times of crisis money is no object). I had it up in

two hours, and now my family is living happily ever after (until the next crisis emerges).

For many parents, the Bible looks a little bit like my child's room. It's a mess. Names, places, events are all over the place, and you hardly know where to start cleaning up. It's such a mess, in fact, that if someone ripped twenty pages out of Leviticus or 1 Chronicles, you might not even notice it was missing. And if your aim is to *teach* the Bible to your children, the mess isn't just confusing. It's stressful.

This book is for parents who want to do a good job with the important but daunting task of teaching the Bible. And just like the airplane oxygen mask that you're supposed to put on yourself first before you put it on your children, this book is first and foremost about you.

Take a step back from the thought of teaching your children and focus on yourself for a moment. This is very important, for how *you* see the Bible will influence your children as much as any curriculum.

Think about your own history of reading Scripture. For example, have you ever tried reading the Bible through from beginning to end (maybe as part of a "Bible in a year" reading program of some sort)?

It is January 1, and you are determined to make a go of it. But it's difficult. You start out with the best of intentions, and things coast along well enough for a while. Genesis is pretty interesting, even though it is fifty chapters long. The Joseph story is nice: sexual intrigue, a little spying.

If you make it through Genesis, you've done well and so you begin with Exodus. This is often easier because nearly everyone has seen Charlton Heston portray Moses for half a century now. The special effects are missing from the biblical version (in fact, a fair amount of the movie is nowhere to be found in the pages of Exodus), but you are familiar with the story line and everything is fine . . . until you get to about chapter 20 and start reading all about laws. The Ten Commandments come first. But after the Ten Commandments, chapters 21–23 are filled with the strangest laws,

about bulls, property lines, servants—not the kinds of things you build your morning devotions around, and certainly not the kinds of things that make sense in the modern West. And how in the world are you supposed to teach this to ten-year-olds?

Then you come to chapter after chapter about the building of the tabernacle. In fact, Exodus 25–40 is all about the tabernacle, with the exception of the golden calf incident in chapters 32–33, which at least introduces some action to the book.

If by some Herculean feat you make it through Exodus, you have to wade through Leviticus, where you hit a brick wall: chapter after chapter of what to sacrifice and when, plus some very strange topics (like how to get rid of mildew). Obviously, you and the Old Testament Israelites breathe a different air. What should you make of all this? And what, if anything, should you teach to your children?

Succumbing to temptation, you skip over to the Psalms (“just for a break; I’ll get back to Leviticus”). They seem so nice and uplifting.

Psalms 1: the righteous prosper, the wicked are punished. So far so good. Psalm 2: God’s son (i.e., King David) is on the throne. Not sure what that means, but it sounds like good news.

Then you hit Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. You don’t make it out of the teens before the Psalms all start looking the same. You become discouraged, and maybe flip over to Proverbs, but here too: so many sayings, and they all start looking alike. And thirty-one chapters! By this time, it’s probably close to spring, so it makes perfect sense to just skip over to the Gospels and forget the rest of the Old Testament. It’s almost Easter anyway.

I don’t mean to make light of our struggles to understand the Bible, but this is a very common phenomenon among Christians today. The Old Testament is particularly tough to wade through. And as a result the Old Testament, which makes up about 4/5 of our Bible, is something many of us end up avoiding.

Our difficulties with the Old Testament bleed over into our efforts to understand the New. The New Testament is the climax of a grand story, one that begins in the Old Testament, and it echoes

back to the Old Testament many, many times. There are about 265 Old Testament passages cited in the New Testament, and some of those are cited more than once—which means that the Old Testament appears over 350 times in the New. That’s a lot. My Thinline NIV New Testament is about 265 pages long—which means that there’s an average of about 1 1/3 Old Testament citations on each page of the New Testament.

But that’s not all. There is more to it than actual *citations*. The New Testament *alludes* to the Old Testament many times without actually quoting it—over 1,000 times!

Take a step back and think about it. The New Testament authors could hardly open their mouths without the Old Testament gushing out.

Yes, the Bible is a detailed, sometimes difficult to follow and understand book, especially the Old Testament. No reason to deny it or be embarrassed for saying it. The prospect of *teaching* the Bible to *one’s own children*, when one feels so untrained and even lost, is intimidating.

This book is an attempt to do for you what the closet organizer in my child’s room did for me: give some sense of *order and meaning* to the chaos. Rather than avoiding the Bible (as I did that horrible, messy room), you will find Scripture becoming a welcome place. When you’re there, you’ll feel that you have a handle on what is what, what belongs where, and how to help your children “keep it clean.”

The plan I’ll lay out in this book is not perfect. It will not take care of every bit of mess and solve every dilemma. But it will help you get a handle on the Bible and its message. (And my child’s floor is not spotlessly clean—there are socks here and there, an occasional pile of clothes or candy wrappers—but it is A LOT better.)



The goal of this approach is not simply for you or your children to *understand* the Bible. Any teaching of Scripture to children must have a much more practical and deeper purpose: to encourage

children to become mature, knowledgeable, and humble followers of Jesus, growing in faith.

Growing in faith is not a contest or part of a daily to-do list. It is a *journey* that *all* Christians are on. Your children have the privilege of beginning that journey under your care and love. Yes, that is a serious responsibility for parents (hence, the anxiety involved). But it is also a *joy* and a *calling* that can be heard echoing through the pages of Scripture. As far back as Exodus, when Moses is giving the instructions for the celebration of Passover, he adds “And when your children ask you ‘What does this ceremony mean *to you*?’ then tell them. . . .” (Exodus 12:26).

There are two things worth pointing out here. First, children will ask what the ceremony—and, by implication, the teachings of the Scriptures—mean. Second, they will ask what they mean *to you*. Even if they do not ask us in words, they are watching us. So, as parents (and teachers), we must first understand what the Bible means *to us*.

So what is the Bible, and what are we supposed to be doing with it?

These may strike some as two odd questions. After all, the Bible is the Word of God and we are supposed to read it and obey it. Fair enough, but that does not even begin to address the question of what the Bible is *doing*. Why does the Word of God say the things it says? Why does it look the way it looks? And is obedience really the essence of what we are supposed to get out of it?

Of course, the answer is *yes*—in part. But the Bible aims much higher; it teaches us to see ourselves and the world around us in fresh, exciting, and challenging ways. The Bible is not a Christian owner’s manual. It bears witness to who God is, what he has done, and who we, as his people, are.

God does not change, and the Gospel bears eternal witness to his unending love for us. Likewise, the core questions of the human drama are now as they have been since the beginning of recorded time: Who are we? Why are we here? What gives meaning to our lives? Does God exist? The Gospel claims to give answers to these types of questions. But the world around us seems to change almost

daily. The information our children have access to, as well as the very structure of their lives, has been affected by the rapid shifts in the world around us. As a result, our children ask different questions than children of other generations, and are not as easily satisfied with traditional answers.

Because of this, many parents approach the study and teaching of the Bible with a certain amount of fear: “Can I actually *do this*? What if I make a mistake and ruin my child spiritually? How can I allow children to ask hard questions without them turning out to be heretics?”

Part of the answer is to remember that you are *not* really up for the task—at least not alone. Remember that your children are God’s children. It is your calling and responsibility to raise them in a godly way, but don’t think for one minute that *their* success rests on *your* skills and abilities. Your children are, after all, God’s work in the end. Like all of us, they are embarking on their own spiritual journey.

Furthermore, no Christian is an island. We all must depend on the larger Christian community, the church, to be part of raising our children. (This is normally part of the vow a congregation takes when a child is either baptized or dedicated.) So, have no fear, parents. You *will* make mistakes (although I hope this book will help you make fewer), but remember God’s grace is bigger than the best of your intentions. He really loves your children. Look on this not as a worrisome task but as a few precious, golden years of opportunity.

One of the most significant challenges Christian parents face is how to pass on our faith to our children, whom we love deeply and who have been entrusted by the Lord to our care. No curriculum or method will give you the magic key, the simple answer that will make this task easy. But I hope that what is laid out in the pages to follow will aid you and your children on your Christian pilgrimage, so that together you will have a mature and viable Christian faith as you pass through the peaks and valleys of life.



PART ONE



How to Teach the Bible

— Chapter Two —

What the Bible Actually Is (and Isn't)

*A clear explanation of the Bible's nature:
a complex and fascinating narrative with
a beginning, middle, and end—not a book of
rules or a manual of morals*

What is the Bible? And how does knowing something about what the Bible *is* change the way we read it? When we sit down in the morning, cup of coffee in our hands, ready to give the Bible a good 15–30 minutes, what is it we are supposed to be “doing”? What is supposed to “happen”? What does it mean to read the Bible? What is the Bible there for?

These may seem like odd questions, and too often we don't think to ask them. But we should begin our task of teaching the Bible by becoming more reflective: considering more carefully what the Bible *is*.

It's All about Expectations

The first thing to keep in mind when we read the Bible is the hardest: Don't go straight to the question "What does this mean to me?"

We are constantly told that the Bible is to be applied to our lives, and so we read it looking for ways to make it so. That can lead us to do one of two things: either skip parts that don't apply very easily (the tabernacle section in Exodus) or dig a certain type of application out of each Scripture reading—one that focuses on a concrete behavior that is supposed to stem from that morning's meditation.

I am all for applying the Bible. Don't get me wrong. But a better understanding of the Bible will lead us in another direction. The first question we should ask about what we are reading is not "How does this apply to me?" Rather, it is "What is this passage saying in the context of the book I am reading, and how would it have been heard in the ancient world?"

A good, thorough study Bible will make answering these questions easier. In addition, there are numerous basic "Bible background" kinds of books on the market that are geared toward everyday readers.¹ You don't have to go wild, and you certainly don't have to be an expert! I am only talking about a reorientation; a commitment to learn, slowly but surely, over the years, to ask questions that the *text* is raising. Our first struggle in reading the Bible is to move from the "What about me?" perspective to the "What does this tell us about God in that context?" question.

Knowing something about what the Bible is designed to do, what its purpose is, will help us adjust our expectations about what it is we hope to find in the Bible. If our expectations are

¹Some richly illustrated volumes are John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today*, and Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity* (both published by Zondervan); and Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, and Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (both published by Baker).

modern instead of ancient, we will get ourselves into a bind. Before we can ask the hard questions—for example, “Is Genesis 1 in harmony with scientific thought? Or does Genesis 1 trump scientific thought?”—we must ask a more foundational question: *What do we have the right to expect from God’s word as a book written in an ancient world?*

Jesus and the Bible Are Similar

Let me give you a challenge that will help you examine your expectations about the Bible: Think of the Bible the way we think of Jesus.

Christianity teaches that Jesus is, mysteriously, both God and human. He is not half one, half the other. He does not appear to be one while “really” being the other. He is both: all God and all human all the time.

Now think of the Bible by drawing a parallel: In the same way that Jesus is both completely divine and human, the Bible also has divine and human dimensions.

Remember, this is only an *analogy*; it certainly does not tell us everything we need to know about the nature of Scripture. But it is a helpful one. Jesus was fully divine and fully human; the Bible is ultimately from God, but every last word of it was written by human beings in certain places and historical settings. Jesus is without sin; and in the same way, the Bible does not fall short of God’s purpose.

Think of Jesus, walking around Palestine in the first century. Although he was God’s son, there was nothing particularly striking about him. He was easily mistaken for just another Galilean Jew—which is one reason why some people were so amazed at his teaching and miracles, while others were so offended (“Who does this guy think he is?”). In fact, for the most part everything about him said “human.” He was born, he had skin and bones, he ate, he laughed, he cried, he wore a robe, he had a Middle Eastern complexion, he wore sandals.

I could go on. My point is that *none of the humanness of Jesus of Nazareth detracts from his being the Son of God*. In fact, through such a lowly state God *chose* to communicate himself. But as human as Jesus was, he was without sin.

Now apply this same point of view to the Bible. If you make a commitment to become more knowledgeable about the ancient world, you will come away realizing how very much at home the Bible was in ancient times. Just like Jesus' clothing and customs were at home in his world, the Bible was written in ancient, very common, languages. It used many of the same expressions and ideas of the ancient world. But because these writings are ultimately from God, they don't "slip up" anywhere. There is no place in the Bible where the Holy Spirit says, "Oops, I really didn't mean to put it that way. Can I have another go at it?" The Bible does exactly what God wants it to do.

Maybe the chart below can help clarify this analogy between Jesus and the Bible.

| Jesus | Bible |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Both divine and human nature | Both divine and human authorship |
| Did not sin | Does not misrepresent God |
| Appeared like an everyday Jew | Appears like an ancient book |
| Power and authority derived from God | Power and authority derived from God |

Jesus was without sin, although fully human. The Bible does not fall short of God's purpose, even though it was written by humans. Both derive their authority by being from God.

Now think carefully about the implications of this.

Considering that Jesus is the Son of God, the Gospels tell us many unexpected things about him. For example, Jesus himself admitted he had limited knowledge. In Matthew 24:36, he says,

“No one knows the day nor the hour, not the angels . . . nor the Son, but only the Father.” Luke 2:52 says, “And [the child] Jesus grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and men”—meaning that the child Jesus learned things as he went along, like any child does, rather than coming into the world filled with complete divine knowledge. And Jesus died. God is not supposed to die.

The Bible is similar. There are many things about it that we would not expect from a book called “God’s Word.” Genesis 1 has strong resemblances to other ancient creation stories. Israel has prophets, priests, and kings, all of whom at times look very similar to the prophets, priests, and kings of the other nations in the ancient world. Laws govern the details of daily lives that are very different from our own—and some parts of which have disappeared forever. New Testament Greek is a very simple, common, everyday version of the higher, more polished classical Greek. It is the language of the common people.

But none of these properties of the Bible I just mentioned are examples of the Bible somehow “falling short.” Instead they display the humanness of the Bible. They correspond to Jesus’ humanity; they are not “errors” that would correspond to Jesus’ sin.

If Genesis 1 were to say, for example, that the God of Israel did not make the world, that would be an error. That would be like Jesus cursing the Father; that would be sin. But the fact that Genesis 1 reflects ancient creation stories does not point to error in the Bible, any more than Jesus’ wearing sandals and speaking Aramaic was sin.

I hope it is clear what I am after here. Don’t expect Jesus to be something he isn’t: a king dressed in fine robes, with servants and armies. He was lowly. He came to serve. Likewise, don’t expect something from the Bible it can’t deliver. Don’t expect it to be high and lofty, detached from the ancient world in which it was written.

C. S. Lewis has a great way of putting it. In 1947, J. B. Phillips published a very earthy English translation of the New Testament letters. (You may have heard of Phillips’ translation of the entire

New Testament, *The New Testament in Modern English*.) Lewis wrote the introduction, defending Phillips' approach to translating the New Testament in a way that the common people of his day would connect with.

Lewis points out that the Greek style of the New Testament shows that the biblical writers did not have a high command of the language. He defends his point by drawing the same analogy we draw here, between Jesus and the Bible.

Does this [the low style of NT Greek] shock us? It ought not to, except as the Incarnation itself ought to shock us. The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby at a peasant-woman's breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of the Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language. If you can stomach the one, you can stomach the other. The Incarnation is in that sense an irreverent doctrine: Christianity, in that sense, an incurably irreverent religion. When we expect that it should have come before the World in all the beauty that we now feel in the Authorized [King James] Version we are as wide of the mark as the Jews were in expecting that the Messiah would come as a great earthly King. The real sanctity, the real beauty and sublimity of the New Testament (as of Christ's life) are of a different sort: miles deeper or *further in*.²

No one says it like C. S. Lewis: Allow the Bible to be the Bible.

Neither Jesus nor the Bible are quite what we might have expected. And it is precisely *that fact* that drives us to see a more real beauty and sublimity in *both*. Sometimes we know the Bible too well; it becomes tame and predictable. But if we look at the Bible as ancient people would have read it, we can be as struck as they were by the power and authority of its message.

²C. S. Lewis, "Introduction" to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), vii–viii.

The Bible Is Not a Rule Book or an Owner's Manual; It Takes Wisdom

If we take seriously the likeness between Christ and the Bible, we will discover that one of the most common ways of looking at the Bible soon becomes very inadequate.

I remember, in my early twenties, reading a book of advice from a pastor who answered questions that people wrote in to him. Many of these people were looking to orient their lives around the Bible; they were looking to the Bible for answers to life's questions.

Few Christians would find fault with this, but consider the following. One woman asked whether, biblically speaking, it was acceptable for Christians to go to the circus. The pastor answered that there was no clear biblical passage that addressed this issue. But then he proceeded to bring together a number of passages from various parts of the Bible and use them to prove his conclusion: Indeed, biblically speaking, it was *not* a good idea to go to the circus.

I laughed good and long when I read this. But since then, my wife and I have done our best to raise three children. Now I realize that parents do indeed crave these sorts of answers to everyday questions about behavior and cultural norms; and they feel, because the Bible is God's word, it should *give* those answers to everyday questions.

The problem is that the Bible is not that kind of book.

We need to learn the kinds of issues the Bible addresses so we can *learn to ask the questions of the Bible that the Bible is meant to answer*. The Bible is not a book on how to invest your money, which political party to join, whether to homeschool, where to go to college, whom to marry, where to live, whether you should buy that car, America as God's chosen people, or a blueprint for present-day world events. It is not, in other words, a "Christian owner's manual." Too many Christians assume that the Bible is the guidebook to address all of life's questions. But that is not what the Bible is designed to do.

The Bible tells the story of how God's people are delivered from death to life, and as a result are now called upon to live a life in harmony with that high calling (this occupies much of Paul's letters). The New Testament in particular describes all sorts of situations faced by early Christians, and the New Testament writers guide these first Christians through each issue. For us today, when we read the New Testament, what we see is a *portrait being painted for us of what a life in Christ looks like*. We are being given the vision of what a Christian life looks like.

What is *not* addressed in the Bible are specifically modern situations. There is no Bible verse that will, either directly or indirectly, answer many of the questions that confront Christian families today: When do you begin dating? Is it OK to watch an R-rated movie? What kinds of books should your children read? What sort of education should they receive?

In this light, I want to introduce what I think is the single most important biblical concept for living a Christian life, not only today, but during any era: wisdom.

Let me give an example.

When my son was twelve, he asked if we could watch the R-rated movie *Saving Private Ryan* together. "All" of his friends had already seen it, and he didn't want to be the oddball.

Ultimately, we watched the movie together. But before we did, I had to consider a number of factors. What was his personality type? What kind of internal "filters" did he have? Was this the right time and place to put him in a controlled setting that might help him grow?

In our particular situation, watching that movie was a tremendously positive experience for him. (The opening battle scene was the most graphic representation of war he had ever seen, and it helped him understand how horrible war is.) Some might think that the violence and dialogue in the movie are inappropriate for a twelve-year-old. I certainly understand the point, but quoting Proverbs 22:6, as one shocked parent did, is not going to resolve the

Not a “Book-by-Book” Approach

Reading the Bible book by book is an extremely important thing to do. Entire books of the Bible, not just individual verses, form our thinking.

But we are dealing with young people. Book studies, as important as they are, typically require an adult attention span. To be fruitful, book studies also require a certain base knowledge. To go back to the analogy I used at the very beginning, the more hooks and shelves you have in your closet, the more the details can be organized in a way that makes sense.

The focus in the approach I outline (as you will see in Part Two) is not on a study of each book *in detail*, but on the flow of the story *in general*. This overview of the biblical *drama* will help make subsequent book studies by your children in their adult years more profitable.

Adults can and should study the Bible in books—or at least in large chunks. But this is too much for many young students, and particularly for very young children—so the tendency has been to move to Bible stories or character studies instead. But there is a better way: get to know Jesus, then see the broad brush strokes of the biblical story, and then begin looking at the Bible in a more adult fashion in the high-school years by addressing some of the bigger issues.

Not a “Defensive” Approach

Most of us are familiar with the controversies surrounding Genesis and science. Battles have raged, most famously in the Scopes trial of the 1920s, and more recently in the Intelligent Design debate (such as the case in Dover, Pennsylvania, that made national headlines in 2005).

These debates have come about because Christians have attempted to apply the Bible to current events and current discoveries that the Bible does not speak to. Expecting from the Bible

things it may not be prepared to deliver can encourage a defensive, even argumentative, approach. Sometimes defending the Bible (with humility) is important and necessary. The difficulty comes when we *teach the Bible* in such a way that we *focus* on the conflicts, rather than on laying the groundwork for a lifetime of study.

The Bible is not a book that was written to be defended. Yes, defending the Bible and Christianity has its place. But just because you can defend the Bible doesn't mean that you understand it. You can argue about whether or not the Exodus is a historical event—but that won't help you understand the book of Exodus.

A defense of Scripture is only as good as what lies beneath it, which should be a mature understanding of the nature of the Bible. Too often, I see Christians defending positions that are based on a false understanding of the biblical story. These positions may temporarily convince young children of the Bible's truth, but as children begin to think for themselves, free of their parents' protection, the inadequacy of the arguments they have been taught may become clear.

As we teach the Bible to our children, we should not be *focused* on defending a particular view of Genesis—or on any other controversial issue. There will be time for this later. Rather, the biblical story should be presented in a positive manner, keeping a focus on the bigger portrait the Bible is painting. We must learn to let the Bible have its way with us, learn to ask *its* questions first, rather than rush to it with ours.

Many of the details of the biblical story may seem strange to us (and even downright weird). But the story as a whole is one of a good and wise God doing unexpected things for an undeserving yet chosen people. This culminates in a vivid description of a new world that begins with Jesus' resurrection. In this new world, death is conquered and we can begin to live as we were created to live.

This is the picture we want our children to see. This is the image we want them to carry with them throughout their lives, for good times and for bad.

The Bible is a book that is meant to be on the “offensive,” aggressively presenting a God who goes to great lengths to put the world back as it should be. If there is any “defensiveness” in our teaching of Scripture, it should come during the high-school years. At that point, it is appropriate to discuss challenges to Scripture, what they imply, and how they should be addressed constructively. But remember that a proper defense is only as good as one’s *mature* understanding of what one is defending. Learning the biblical story *first* allows our children to have a mature grasp of the issues, rather than falling victim to fear, exaggeration, or a false sense of security.

I have seen many times, as I am sure you have, young people walking away from the faith because they see it as irrelevant. The first two parts of the pattern I suggest are aimed at keeping that from happening. When the really hard questions about the Bible and the Christian faith hit home during the high-school years, you can *build* on the foundation of the previous years.

What we should avoid, at all costs, is presenting difficult issues at early ages, giving simplistic answers, and then wondering why, at the age of fifteen or so, our children walk away from a faith that they find childish.



Redemption: Abraham and Moses

Redemption, Stage One: Abraham

Genesis 1–11 has been a prelude to the heart of the biblical story: God’s redemption of his people, their deliverance and rescue.

Enter Abraham in Genesis 12 (or if you want to get technical, Abram, since his name is not changed to Abraham until chapter 17). Abraham is the father of the Hebrews; from him come Isaac, Jacob (renamed Israel), and Joseph. At the beginning of the story, we find Abraham in Mesopotamia: the area around Babylon, “between the rivers” (which is what “Mesopotamia” means). Those two rivers are the Tigris and Euphrates, which can still be found on the world map today.

Abraham’s pagan origin is clear; it is even mentioned in Joshua 24:1–2. It is a bit unexpected, is it not, that the first ancestor of the Israelites should be so closely associated with a part of the world that will give the Israelites so much trouble in the future? After all,

the Babylonians are the ones who will take the southern kingdom captive in about 586 B.C. (see 2 Kings 25).

Yet it is from these people that Abraham was chosen, for reasons completely unexplained by the biblical story. Later, this will lead to a whole host of stories told about Abraham, among Jews in the post-biblical period, in an effort to explain what Abraham *did* to deserve such an honor. But Genesis 12 is silent.

This type of silence at crucial junctures is not at all uncommon in the Old Testament. These silences are called “gaps” in the narrative, and it is sometimes hard to know whether they are gaps only to *us* (maybe the ancient Israelites were in the know) or to the Israelites as well.

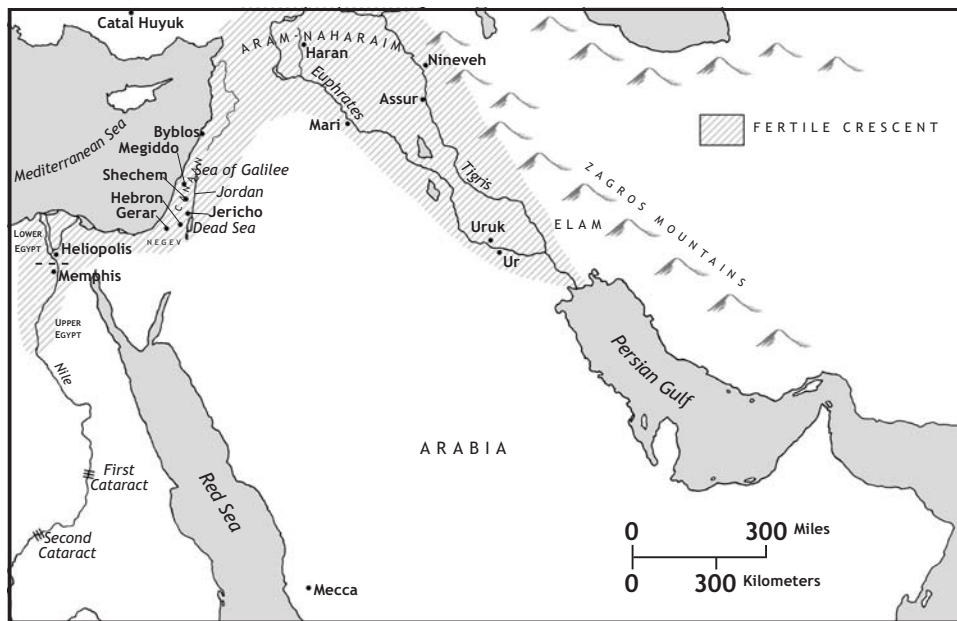
I only bring this up here because, when it comes to reading and teaching the Old Testament, a lot of the action happens “in the gaps.” This is where the questions come from. “What did Abraham do to deserve such an honor?” “Where did Cain get his wife from?” “How did Cain and Abel know what sacrifice even *was* at the dawn of time?” These kinds of questions come up in children’s Sunday School classes all the time, perhaps because children are not yet conditioned to “know” that they shouldn’t ask them! But careful readers of the Bible have been asking these questions for a long time, even hundreds of years before Jesus, thanks to the gaps in the text.

When these questions come up as you read the biblical story with your children, consider how you can use them for teaching purposes. I have three suggestions. First, affirm and encourage your child’s curiosity (God can handle it). Second, mention that these kinds of questions have been asked by believers for a long time. Third, consider with your child the possibility that these things are left unsaid because they are not, for the larger purposes of the Bible, important. There is a bigger story to be told, and your focus, should, at least for now, should be on that bigger story and not on the small details. (In other words, the Bible is not a legal document intended to cover each and every question that comes up.)

Abraham traveled with his caravan up along the two rivers and stopped in Haran. Later, he was called by God to go to Canaan. Through Abraham, God would make a people for himself:

The LORD had said to Abram, “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.”⁶



Map 1: Abraham's World

⁶Genesis 12:1–3

Jesus: Scene One and Scene Two

Redemption, Stage Five: Jesus (Scene One)

Jesus' coming to earth begins the fifth and final act of God's redemption, but it occurs in two stages. The first stage is his first coming, the second stage is his second coming.

There is disagreement among some Christians about the second stage—namely about whether there will be a period of Christ's reign on earth before the real end. But we don't need to rehash those debates in order to understand what that second stage is *about*.

Let's start with Jesus' *first* coming, which is the focus of the Gospels and much of the material in the Epistles. Jesus came to reveal to his people God in his fullness. He was God's son—which means that he, like David and the other kings of Israel, and like Adam before them, was God's earthly representative.

The twist, of course, is that Jesus' sonship has a more direct connection to God—a “genetic connection” to the Father. He is

more than an image-bearer of God. It is a mystery, but to see Jesus *is* to see the Father, for he and the Father are one. Jesus, in other words, is divine.

Still, as Paul puts it in Philippians 2:6–8, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be held on to, and so he willingly became a man—a man born in low circumstances, persistently misunderstood and mocked. Jesus lived his life in a state of double humiliation: he was God become man, and as a man he was nothing much to look at.

Once again God chooses to show his glory through the humble things. God could have made himself known fully, climactically, in a good old blast of lightning, or the sky opening up. But he didn't. Jesus came as a lowly carpenter's son.

But his mission was nothing less than beginning the final stage of redemption. He was the messiah, as we discussed earlier, but not one who came from a ruling royal family and intended to wipe out the Roman invaders. His messiahship was far more sweeping. In his plan, Jews and Gentiles would *together* be made whole, forgiven of their sins, through Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Let's use some Old Testament language here that we've used in the previous four stages. Jesus came to do what no one from Adam on, including Israel as a nation, was able to do: be a blessing to all the nations, Jew and Gentile. He did this through his death and resurrection. By his death he restored humanity to God, and by his resurrection he raised all of God's people to a new life. In that new life, being an image-bearer of God is no longer a distant possibility but a present reality. Through Jesus' new people, called the church, God will continue to reconcile the world to himself.

I fear that too often we sell the biblical story short by reducing it to "Jesus died on the cross so I wouldn't go to hell." Fair enough, but this way of putting it cheapens the Gospel to *simply* a matter of "how you get saved." The Gospel certainly includes this, but there is much more to it as well. Jesus actually fulfills Israel's story thus far. Through Jesus, all the nations are truly and finally blessed, as promised through Abraham. Jesus is the new and

improved Moses, who leads his people out of a different kind of slavery (sin and death) and delivers them safely to their new home. Like David, Jesus is anointed by God to lead his people. And when God delivers his people from Babylon, this is a foreshadowing in the Old Testament storyline of the time when God will bring his people home. But this home is not a piece of property along the Mediterranean Sea, but a heavenly abode, a new Garden, as we see in Revelation 22.

Jesus died and was raised to life to allow all of us to be a part of Israel's grand story. His resurrection was not just a last-minute trick God pulled off to show people his strength. Jesus' resurrection was the first part of that final, climactic stage. It was a present down payment (or to use Paul's language, a "deposit"—see 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5) of what will happen more fully, more finally, at the second act of his redemption—the second coming.

Redemption, Stage Five: Jesus (Scene Two)

By being raised from the dead, Jesus became the "firstfruit" of the future resurrection of all believers (as Paul liked to put it). In other words, what happened to Jesus in his resurrection is a *preview* of what will happen to all those who are "in Christ" (another favorite phrase from Paul).

When Jesus rose from the dead, the future invaded the present. We have a real, concrete preview of what will happen to all believers, all those who are "in Christ" at the second coming.

Christians live "between the times." We live in a time where the "last days" have already begun by virtue of Jesus' resurrection, but where the final installment of the last days is in the future. In the meantime, however, what defines us as God's people is being united to God in Christ by faith. When all the church attendance books have been lost in a pile of rubble, when all our efforts to teach our children the Bible come to an end, the question remaining will be whether we are united, with Christ, to God.