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Introduction

The Holy Scriptures are the highway signs: Christ is the way.

—Søren Kierkegaard

The young woman standing before me was a spiritual blank slate. She had no reference point to begin her journey toward God, no experience, no context. She approached me after a worship gathering on a Sunday morning. This was her first time in church. Not her first time in *this* church, but her first time in any church ... *ever*.

In a matter of seconds, she gave me a rough idea of her thoughts about God. It wasn't that she didn't believe *in* God; she didn't know what to believe *about* God. From her point of view, God had never struck her as urgent, relevant, or worth serious consideration. In short, she had no God history. Certain unwelcome events in her life had recently prompted her to consider the Christian faith. So she found herself in church, talking to me.

More than two decades ago, George Hunter coined a term for people with no God history and “no christian memory.” Based on the word *agnostic*, a term for those who view God as unknowable, Hunter came up with the word *ignostic* to describe someone who is ignorant about the subject of God.¹ An ignostic may willingly

admit that God is knowable, but he or she doesn't have the first clue about how or where to begin a search for him.

The young woman's first question for me was simple: "Is there a book I can read that can tell me what you believe about God?" The answer, of course, was the Bible. It was the right answer, yet I secretly wondered whether it was the best answer to give her.

If the Bible intimidates even the most adept readers, imagine how intimidating it would seem to this young woman, a first-time Bible reader. On top of that, the Bible is notoriously easy to misinterpret, especially when lone verses are lifted out of context.

Scripture is an infinite resource for knowing God and understanding life, but practically speaking, where should a new Bible reader begin? And how can anyone decipher the bizarre names, faraway places, and cultures of the distant past? Who is qualified to guide us in our quest to grasp the simple truths of God's love, the necessity of a life-changing experience with him, and the promise of forgiveness and a fresh start?

The Bible is like the ocean, according to an old metaphor. The ocean is so deep in places that no person, however capable a swimmer, could survive its extremities. But at the same time, when the ocean touches the land, the water is so shallow and the waves lapping the beach are so gentle that even a toddler can safely play there. Anyone who has visited the beach has seen firsthand that the ocean is both intimidating and approachable.

The same is true of the Bible. Like the ocean, its depths can never be fathomed. Even after a lifetime of study, the most brilliant theologians admit they've only begun to plumb its depths.

Centuries of Christian scholarship haven't been able to chart its vast expanse. The Bible can be intimidating and yet approachable at the same time. Anyone can pick up a Bible and encounter simple truths that are nothing short of life changing.

Since no single book can fully explore the depths of the Bible, in this volume we'll focus on the best-known passages of Scripture that form the basis of the faith we know as Christianity. Consider this your guidebook to the Bible. Throw a beach towel over your shoulder and take a stroll in the surf.

For those of you who are experienced Bible readers, I offer a word of advice: Reject the tendency to be satisfied with your current understanding of the Bible. Refuse the temptation to think that what you grasp of the Scriptures today is somehow enough. Don't just settle for wading in the surf. Dive deeper! Untold riches await your discovery.

Many years ago, the evangelist Robert Sumner told the story of a man from Kansas City who was involved in an explosion. The accident left him badly burned. Tragically the man lost the use of his hands and the sight in both eyes. He had recently become a Jesus follower and had discovered the joy of reading the Bible. But now he was unable to see or use his hands to read braille.

One day the man learned of a woman in England who had taught herself to read braille using her lips. He tried this approach as well, but the nerve endings on his lips were too damaged to distinguish the characters. As he made a final attempt to read braille with his lips, the man's tongue happened to brush the page. Instantly he realized he had found a way to read the Bible after all.

Since then, he has read the Bible cover to cover four times, using only his tongue.²

Given the obvious barriers to reading the Bible, why didn't this man simply read it once and be done with it? Why read the Scriptures again and again? Simply put, each time we read the Scriptures, our understanding is expanded and our love for God is deepened. So if you're a more experienced Bible reader, these forty chapters will not only help you explore the Bible's biggest ideas, but they'll also enable you to grasp afresh the greatness of God.

Selecting the Bible readings for this book was more art than science. My experience as a pastor, my journey as a follower of Jesus, and many conversations with people informed my choices. Often, people who didn't grow up in church complain about the challenge of understanding the Bible. I asked a number of them to give me insight as to what they don't comprehend about Scripture. I also talked with parents who confessed that their children know more about the Bible than they do, and these parents wished they had a safe place to ask questions in a judgment-free environment.

These people even confessed to feeling ignorant when everyone else seems to be in the know about well-known passages in the Bible. Psalm 23 is often quoted at funerals, but what does it really mean? And 1 Corinthians 13 is recited during many wedding ceremonies, but who wrote these words and where are they found in the Bible?

The Scripture passages you're about to encounter could be considered absolutely essential for understanding big ideas of the Bible. To understand the Beatles, it's essential to be familiar with

the *White Album*. To know the Eagles well, listening to “Hotel California” is a must. To recognize Beethoven, you first have to get acquainted with his piano sonatas. In other words, to know these artists well, you must be able to readily recognize their signature pieces of music.

Likewise, the Bible contains signature chapters that every follower of Jesus should recognize instantly. You not only *should* know these chapters, but you *can*. After understanding these chapters, you’ll be able to recognize the rhythm of the Scriptures and tap your toes to the cadence. As I’ve taught these chapters in my church, I’ve enjoyed watching faces light up when, for the first time, people experience reading the Bible with understanding instead of insecurity.

As a matter of good practice, I encourage you to read the Bible selections first. Each chapter will take about five minutes to read. Then, after reading the entire Bible passage, read my brief exploration of that passage. Finally, I encourage you to reread the Bible chapter with the benefit of knowing more about the context and content.

Before you dive into the breakers of the Bible, I wish to highlight two important terms that will not only serve beginners well but will also serve as valuable reminders for those with greater exposure to the Bible.

Throughout this volume, I refer to the *Older Testament* and the *New Testament*. The Older Testament is the faith history of the Hebrew people. In our culture, *old* often means “obsolete,” while *older* implies a bit of experience. The thirty-nine books of

the Older Testament were written in the Hebrew language by the Jewish community that believed in God prior to the coming of Jesus. Without the Older Testament, we would have great difficulty appreciating and understanding the New Testament, a collection of twenty-seven books written in the Greek language by the first followers of Jesus. These books contain God's renewed plan to bring humanity into a relationship with him.

Because the Bible was originally written in ancient languages, we must rely on modern-language translations to make it accessible. For this guide, we'll use the Christian Standard Bible.

The forty Bible chapters we'll be discovering and discussing are broken down into eight sections. In each section, we'll cover five chapters of Scripture under one theme that is both biblical and applicable to real life. My hope is that you'll quickly realize that the terms *biblical* and *real life* aren't opposites but synonyms. The Bible is important not only because it's an ancient document but also because it enables us to meet the eternal God in the present moment.

If I had selected forty chapters of the Bible at random, you might arrive at the end of this book more confused than ever about what the Bible is all about. So what ties all forty chapters in *The Good Book* together? Allow me to answer that question with a story.

Early one morning I was waiting in line at my favorite coffee shop. Soon a blind woman entered the shop. As she walked across the room, tapping her walking stick on the floor, I decided to be helpful. When she was a dozen feet away, I told her that I was at her ten o'clock and was at the end of the ordering line. As we stood

together in line, we struck up a conversation. She was on her way to the state capital with some colleagues to lobby for the visually impaired community.

“In fact, I’m meeting some friends here,” she said.

With that, she tapped her walking stick on the tile floor. I then noticed three or four of her friends across the room. Instantly their heads swung around to look for her—even though they couldn’t see. One of them took his cane and rapped it in response on the tiles under his table. They had found one another. Had I not been at the center of the action, I would never have observed their taps. I also learned what their taps meant. In three or four taps each, they had sent the message, “I’m here. I’m here.”

The forty chapters that follow cover the most essential themes of the Bible. More than that, as you read them, I hope you sense a tap. In the pages of this book, I hope you sense the presence of God saying to you, “I’m here. I’m here.”

As you begin, remember that the ultimate benefit of reading the Scriptures isn’t greater familiarity with the Bible but deeper intimacy with God. The Bible, from the first word to the last, points to the person of Jesus. My prayer is that you’ll encounter the eternal love of God by meeting Jesus in the pages of Scripture.

FOR REFLECTION

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of

God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

Don't miss the promise and the importance of reading the Bible: if you know the Scriptures, you'll never be at a loss for how to handle life.

What do you believe will be your greatest challenge in reading the Bible?

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**IN THE
BEGINNING**

Genesis 1

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." There was an evening, and there was a morning: one day.

⁶ Then God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters, separating water from water." ⁷ So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸ God called the expanse "sky." Evening came and then morning: the second day.

⁹ Then God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land "earth," and the gathering of the water he called "seas." And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, "Let the earth produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds." And it was so. ¹² The earth produced vegetation: seed-bearing plants according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ Evening came and then morning: the third day.

¹⁴ Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will serve as signs for seasons and for days and years. ¹⁵ They will be lights in the expanse of the sky to provide light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule over the day and the lesser light to rule over the night — as well as the stars. ¹⁷ God placed them in the expanse of the sky to provide light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ Evening came and then morning: the fourth day.

²⁰ Then God said, "Let the water swarm with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." ²¹ So God created the large sea-creatures and every living creature that moves and swarms in the water, according to their kinds. He also created every winged creature according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them: "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the waters of the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth." ²³ Evening came and then morning: the fifth day.

²⁴ Then God said, "Let the earth produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that crawl, and the wildlife of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. ²⁵ So God made the wildlife of the earth according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that crawl on the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth." ²⁹ God also said, "Look, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the surface of the entire earth and every tree whose fruit contains seed. This will be food for you, ³⁰ for all the wildlife of the earth, for every bird of the sky, and for every creature that crawls on the earth — everything having the breath of life in it — I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good indeed. Evening came and then morning: the sixth day.

1

You're More Like God Than You Think

Genesis 1

You're more like God than anything else he created. At times you might feel worthless. Perhaps this is why the first chapter of the Bible sends the unmistakable message that you are priceless. Even on days when you feel barely human, you are, in fact, more like your Creator than anything else in existence.

Speaking of feeling barely human, I assure you that I face my own set of challenges. No matter how much Scripture I read or how hard I pray, progress seems slow and halting when it comes to a problem that plagues me. What's my difficulty? My personality gravitates toward worst-case scenarios, leading me into worry and fear. My mind is adept at conjuring negative outcomes for any situation. I struggle even though the Bible is peppered with “fear nots”—the most common command in Scripture, and two words Jesus uttered often. My anxiety seems to have grown over the years. I'm constantly concerned for my family, about making ends meet,

and about the group of people I help lead. I tend to obsess over all the things I can't control.

My lack of progress could be interpreted as a spiritual failure on my part. And perhaps in some ways it is. But in another way, this struggle offers me an ongoing opportunity to learn to depend on God each day. Without this tension, I might fall into the trap of thinking I can handle life without the Lord's help.

Even on days when I face my worst bouts of worry, I'm still the closest representative of God in all creation. And the same is true of you. Even in your worst moments, you're more like God than the best of the rest of creation.

When we read Genesis 1, it's easy to become sidetracked from this truth by focusing on lesser ideas. For instance, people have long debated the age of the universe. If it were essential to our faith to know the exact date of creation, I suspect God would have shared it with us. He didn't. Nevertheless, many modern readers and heavy thinkers dig into Genesis 1 and immediately debate the age of the cosmos. Answers range from billions of years to a mere six thousand.

A seventeenth-century thinker by the name of John Lightfoot confidently stated that God completed the creation event in the year 3929 BC. How's that for accuracy! At this point there's little to be gained from such speculation. Entertaining such theories will distract you from the wonderful truth in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible: *you bear a striking resemblance to your Creator.*

Instead of the *when* of creation, Genesis 1 would have us focus on the *who* of creation. Though dates and statistics elude us, we're

led to the certainty that there is a divine personality at work in creation: “In the beginning *God* . . .” (Gen. 1:1).

The first glimpse we're given of God in the Bible leaves an indelible imprint on our souls: God is creative. His creativity is evident throughout the visible world. Creation is both infinitely large and infinitesimally small. And God is responsible for all of it!

The heart of a hummingbird “weighs a fraction of an ounce [and] beats eight-hundred times a minute.” By contrast, the heart of a whale weighs one thousand pounds¹ and is the size of a compact car.

God's creation is vast. Imagine holding an atlas of the universe in your lap. Each page contains a picture of a single galaxy, some spiraled, others elliptical, still others irregular—all of them stunning. You flip through your universal atlas at the rate of one page every second. To go from cover to cover would require approximately ten thousand years.

God's creation also contains variety. When God created trees, he didn't merely create one kind of tree. In the Amazon jungle alone, there are thousands of known species of trees.

The only word that comes close to describing the fullness of God's creative genius is *majestic*. In its majesty, all of creation mirrors something of its Creator. The same whale mentioned earlier communicates with other whales via a low-frequency hum. Two whales are capable of carrying on a conversation even when they're separated by hundreds and perhaps thousands of miles of water.² Indeed, majesty does come to mind. And residing atop the majesty scale is humanity—you and me.

Along with the *who* of creation, Genesis 1 also addresses the *how* of creation. God spoke, and existence exploded into being. God's verbal big bang was the source for everything from quasars to quarks and lightning to lightning bugs.

As you read Genesis 1, notice the rhythm and order of creation. There's a beautiful arrangement and symmetry to God's creative activity. What he formed in the first three days, he correspondingly filled in the three days that followed. Day 1 found him creating light and dark. On day 4 he filled what he formed with sun, stars, moon, and meteors. On day 2 God formed the sky and sea, followed by filling creation with birds and fish on day 5. Day 3 witnessed God forming land and then populating it with all sorts of creatures on day 6. Forming and filling.

Included in day 6 was creating human beings. God started simple, creating light and darkness, but his formations became increasingly complex as his creative activity continued. God culminated with the creation of humanity, his most intricate invention.

Genesis 1 is clear: the pinnacle of God's creative work was man and woman. In God's eyes, nothing in the created order was more impressive. Nothing else could serve as the ultimate fruit of his forming power. Genesis 1:27 offers this observation: "So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female."

What could it mean to be made in the image of God? Thinkers and theologians have wrestled with this question for centuries.

Here's a small example. Though I love my children equally, I have a unique relationship with my son Seth. In many ways—body

build, attitude, humor, and appearance—Seth captures my essence in his smaller form. Sometimes I can almost read his thoughts. You could say that he bears my image.

So it is between God and human beings. We bear his image in our smaller frames. Internally we resemble him because we *have* a spirit and God *is* spirit. We're more than mere physical beings. This spiritual element (or soul, if you prefer) may be invisible, but it exists nonetheless.

Externally we bear God's image because of our capacity to experience relationships. That reflects God's own desire to be in relationship with us. We have a built-in need and desire to relate to God and other humans because we were created in his image. That's what allows us to enjoy intimacy with him.

Many people wonder whether Adam and Eve were the only people God directly created. In later chapters of the Bible, their descendants went off and met other people east of Eden. Where did these people come from?

All history is selective. No history book in the world could possibly record every event surrounding a given historical occurrence. Likewise, the Bible is selective. But we trust that even though its content is selective, it's also significant. God shared the people and events that would lead us to a better understanding of him.

Genesis 1 reveals two essential truths about who you are. First, you are not an accident. You are not the result of cosmic chance; you're an intentional and individual creation of God. Second, God created you as an act of love. God is far from indifferent when it concerns you.

We share ourselves with only those we care about. Just as we share ourselves with only those we care about, God shared the best part of himself with you and me. Nothing else in all creation can make this claim.

So relish this life, knowing that when God sees you, he can't help but see a reflection and resemblance of himself.

FOR REFLECTION

Acknowledging God as creator is a simple and sure way to remove the weight of stress from our lives. We're made according to God's design. And our designer has given us a destiny! Fulfilling that destiny is a matter of putting all of life and our future into his hands. We aren't expected to handle life on our own; we are God's responsibility.

What one action or attitude can you change today that will help you better reflect the image of God—your true identity?