

S e s s i o n 1 , E s s a y 1

# THE KINGDOM STORY

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To live faithfully as a follower of Christ, we must both think and love as a Christian. This requires an understanding of the broader biblical narrative and an ability to use the Bible as an interpretive lens.

The overarching narrative of the Bible is comprised of four “chapters”: *Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation*. Running through these chapters are the Bible’s four basic plotlines of humanity’s relationship with God, self, others, and the created order. This kingdom story provides a conceptual framework or an interpretive lens through which the Christian can better understand and engage the world.

## **Creation: *The World As It Ought To Be***

Read Genesis 1 and 2.

God created and it was good. He created humankind in His own image and it was very good. In Genesis 1 and 2, we find humankind in right relationship with *God*, with *each other*, within *themselves*, and with *the created order*.

We also find humankind employed in meaningful work. Consider the first job description given to humankind in Genesis

1:28: “God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” In Genesis 2:15, Adam is told to cultivate the land. Though one of his responsibilities was to develop and care for the garden, his work was to extend beyond the garden to the whole created order. As image bearers of God, humanity was made to be sub-creators, to rule, to work, and to worship, continuing the creative process.

While the word *dominion* is a bit archaic, the idea is very important for several themes in the biblical narrative, especially vocation. As image bearers, humanity was created for leadership. Although we all lead in varying degrees, we all have spheres of responsibility, even if only for ourselves.

Dallas Willard describes this leadership: “We are made to ‘have dominion’ within an appropriate domain of reality. This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us and is the basis of the destiny for which we were formed. We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with unique eternal calling to count for good in

God's great universe.”<sup>1</sup>

God granted humanity the responsibility of being His representatives and stewards in creation, fulfilling His divine will. This is meaningful work and an unbelievable privilege. And this mandate, given before the Fall, indicates God's original intent for the world and for human participation in it.

### **The Fall: *The World As It Often Is***

Read Genesis 3.

Consider the havoc rendered by the Fall. Guilt and corruption entered the relationship between God and humanity. Innocence was replaced by shame and fear. Genesis 3:9-10 says: “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’”

Next, blame replaces trust and exposes the corrosion that was taking place *in* the hearts of Adam and Eve that resulted in interpersonal brokenness *between* Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3: 12-13 we see that instead of trust there is blame: “The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”

Finally, creation itself is affected by the Fall; both the material earth and the immaterial structure of work suffer brokenness. In fact, the corruption of sin touches every aspect of creation: “To Adam He said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat of it,” Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return’” (Genesis 3:17-19).

Our culture tends to have a fragmented view of sin that keeps us from fully comprehending the effects of the Fall. Sin is often viewed as either *merely spiritual* or *merely systemic*. Those who tend to view sin as *merely spiritual* identify sin primarily as guilt. In this view sin is located in the human heart and results in a broken relationship with God. While holding individuals accountable for their behavior, this view neglects the corruption that was unleashed through sin in relational, physical, social, and cultural areas of life.

On the other hand, when one identifies sin primarily as corruption, one is in danger of embracing a *merely systemic* view of sin. This is when the corrosive aspect of sin is understood and located throughout creation, but especially in social structures. While taking social injustice seriously, this view often fails to hold individuals responsible for sin.

Guilt and corruption, the twin aspects of sin, are essential to a proper understanding of the doctrine of sin. Embracing either guilt or corruption over the other results in a truncated view of the scope of the fall.

Even though human relationship with God is broken, the mandate to subdue and rule (take responsibility and lead) the created order has not been rescinded; in fact, it was reissued after the flood (Genesis 9:1-7). Our primary job description, given in Genesis 1:28, remains in place. However, now we live and work in a world that has been marred by sin and there are opposing forces at work in creation.

### **Redemption: *The Way The World Can Be***

God created with purpose and He was not surprised or distracted from that purpose by human sin. Foreseeing the Fall before creation, God planned for the redemption of His created order. He is acting out this plan within the scope and confines of history, progressively revealing His saving grace.

Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection

are the central and pivotal events concerning God's cosmic plan for redemption. This redemption is touching every domain that has been corrupted by sin including the material and immaterial creation. Along with the redeemed people of God, Christ's redemption is for things like art and industry, work, and leisure.

Speaking about Jesus Christ and the cosmic scope of redemption, Paul writes:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over *all creation*. For by him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* were created by him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in *everything* He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, *and through him to reconcile to himself all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross [italics added]. Colossians 1:15-20.

Paul says that God's plan for the fullness of time is to unite all things in heaven and earth. These "all things" will not be destroyed but healed and united in Christ: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which He lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, *to unite all things* in him, *things in heaven and things on earth* [italics added]" (Ephesians 1:7-9).

Sin is not the only force at play in the world. In the redemption chapter, the kingdom of God's beloved prince clashes with the kingdom of darkness, making two starkly

different futures available to people. Through Christ, the kingdom of God and a new kind of life within His kingdom have been made readily available to humanity. The kingdom, which has always existed, is now accessible.

Dallas Willard explains that the call to repent because the kingdom of the heavens is at hand (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7) "is a call for us to reconsider how we have been approaching our life, in light of the fact that we now, in the presence of Jesus, have the option of living within the surrounding movements of God's eternal purposes, of taking our life into his life."<sup>2</sup>

How can one live within "the surrounding movements of God's eternal purposes"? How does the Christian orient his or her life to God's redemptive work in the world? These are questions of lordship, played out within each person's area of leadership. Proper leadership reflects a beneficent life, lived under the lordship of Christ, bringing all that one controls under His lordship. We are to express the image of God through our leadership by being sub-creators and cultivators.

Before the Fall, lordship was implicit; everything that humanity controlled was perfectly ordered in subjection to God. But post-Fall, all spheres of human activity (e.g., vocational, societal, cultural, relational, creational, personal, etc.) are corrupted and need to be restored. Each individual is responsible to bring all that he or she controls back under the lordship of Christ. We align ourselves with God's purposes of redemption, starting with self and working outward, by exercising lordship-leadership.

Acting for the purposes of redemption or acting redemptively does not mean that people redeem anything or anybody. It simply means that we cooperate with God's redemptive purposes. Redemptive activity, in this sense, refers to human agency initiated, influenced, and empowered by the Holy Spirit that moves created structures away from the guilt and corruption of the Fall and back toward

creational norms.

In 1 Corinthians 3: 5-9, Paul refers to himself and others as God's fellow workers. But he makes it clear that although one plants and another waters, it is God who causes growth. In this sense we are active agents rather than passive recipients of redemption. The church is called to be salt and light, both of which are effective agents. Salt prevents decay while light disperses the darkness.

Humanity was designed to be sub-creators and stewards, in subjection to divine will. We were created to lead and this is how we cooperate with God's plan of redemption. When acting redemptively means exercising Christ-like leadership, it is proper to describe "doing good" as redemptive.

The world will never be perfect until the final judgment when Christ returns and makes all things new. But this does not lessen our responsibility to steward and lead. We are to cultivate what is ours to bring God honor and to make life a more fully human experience for those whom we lead. As we exercise leadership in the manner that God intended, we honor Him and build reference points within culture so that people can better understand His character.

### **Consummation: *The World As It Will Be***

Read Revelation 21:1-11.

In the final chapter of our story, *Consummation*, all the plotlines in the biblical narrative are resolved. Sin and death are forever done away with. The created order is healed. Humanity is restored to God and the New Creation is established. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary explains Revelation 21:1-2 like this:

We have now come to the final revelation given to us in Holy Scripture, a glorious climax to all that God has inspired men to write for the edification of his people throughout the ages. In this passage

we move from time into eternity. Sin, death, and all the forces antagonistic to God are now forever put away.

This description, the equal of which cannot be found in any other literature of the ancient world, begins with John's stating that he saw a new heaven and a new earth. There are two Greek words translated "new" in the New Testament: *neos* and the one used here, *kainos*, suggesting "fresh life rising from the decay and wreck of the old world" (*Swete*). Therefore, this passage does not teach that the heavens and earth are now brought into existence for the first time, but that they possess a new character.<sup>3</sup>

Let's look at the biblical plotlines mentioned in the introduction and see how they are resolved in the final chapter of our story. Each of these plotlines can be viewed through an *ought-is-can-will* framework (see next section) and show up in each chapter of the story. The gospel itself is reflected in each of these relational plotlines.

***God's relationship with humanity.*** In the final chapter of our story God's relationship with humanity will be completely and forever restored as He takes the redeemed as His bride and once again makes His dwelling place with humanity (Revelation 19).

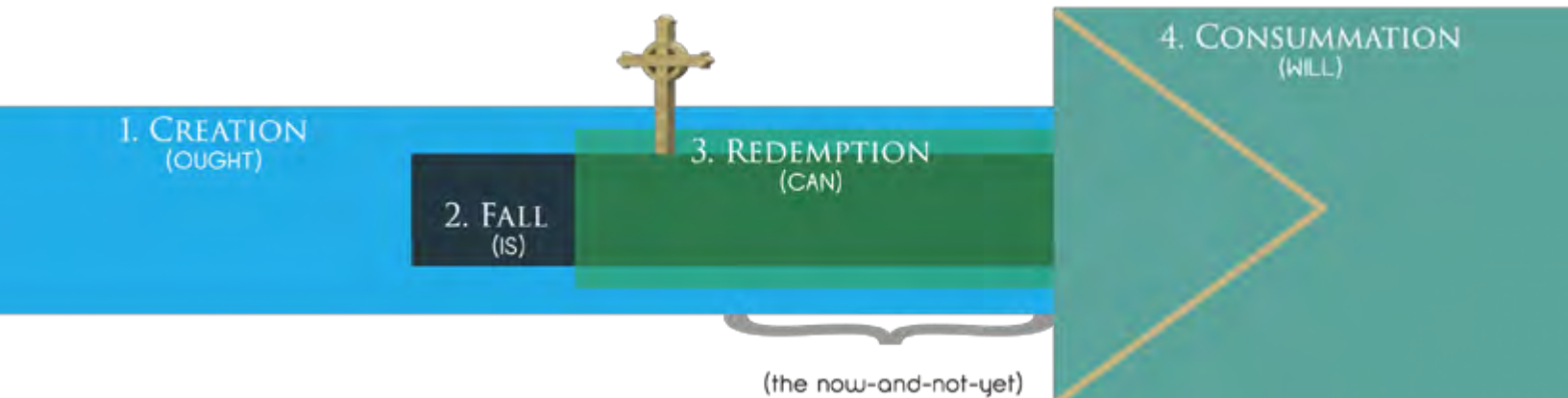
***Human relationships with one another.*** There is a corporate element to God's relationship with His people; He has one bride, the church, made of all His people. Interpersonal relationships will be healed and fully restored. People will be reconciled to one another (Ephesians 2:13-16).

***Human relationship with self.*** When Christ appears, we will appear with Him in glory. We were created in the image of God and we are currently being "renewed in the image of our creator." And one fine day, each of us will fully and rightfully reflect the image of Christ as corruption, sin, and death are put away forever

(Colossians 3:4,10).

**Humanity's relationship with the created order.** The groaning of creation will cease as it is renewed and restored on that final day. Compare *Romans 8:19-22* with *Revelation 21:1-2*.

chapter of the gospel is being played out in a given situation and how one might give a redemptive nudge to the creational structures involved or bring the message of redemption to people involved:



### The Ought-Is-Can-Will Framework

C.S. Lewis once told of looking into a dark tool shed with a small hole in its roof. A beam of light was shining through the hole. Lewis was surprised that as he looked *at* the light he could see dust particles floating in the air, but the light did nothing to illuminate the shed. But when he climbed up on a table and looked down *with* the light, he could see everything in the shed clearly. Lewis compared the beam of light with the gospel. Looking *with* the light of the gospel allows us to analyze and interpret the world we live in.

*Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation* correspond with *ought-is-can-will* and form a framework for examining and critiquing every aspect of our lives and the world we live in, including the inner self, society, and culture. Thinking *with* the kingdom story explains how any given situation is reflected in the gospel and recognizes appropriate, redemptive responses to each situation. The *ought-is-can-will* framework identifies which

- **Ought** – *Creation*. God created and it was good. Everything in the world, material and immaterial, was as it **ought** to be.
- **Is** – *Fall*. Humanity fell from grace as guilt and corruption entered the world through sin. The Fall represents what the world **is** now, apart from Christ.
- **Can** – *Redemption*. There is an additional dynamic working within the fallen world. Through the work of redemption, Christ is restoring the created order. Redemption is what **can** be.
- **Will** – *Consummation*. On one future day, Christ will complete the work of redemption and completely restore the world under His kingship. **Consummation** is what **will** be.

**The framework helps us look at the Word of God.** The Bible has many themes that are shaped and change as they pass through the different chapters of the story. Consider the kingdom of God, image bearers, the dwelling place of

God, and vocation and how these themes can be understood within this biblical framework.

Using the framework to understand themes in the Bible is helpful because it ensures that the whole scope of the story is taken into consideration, limiting the potential for distorted interpretation through proof texting.

If one were to draw conclusions based on a single verse or even what the Bible has to say about a topic in one of the chapters of the story, one might tend to hold overly simplistic positions. For instance, if one were to build a position on the use of alcohol by drawing only from references in the *Fall* chapter, one

might decide that drinking is always wrong for everybody. If one takes into account references from *Creation*, *Redemption*, and *Consummation*, one would come to a much more nuanced position.

This is particularly important when teaching children and young disciples how to read the Bible. Discipleship becomes more about teaching others how to think with the kingdom story than giving specific answers with matching Bible verses. The *ought-is-can-will* framework is designed to teach the skill of Christian thinking, training the student to think with more nuance.

BIBLE THEMES	CREATION <i>Ought</i>	FALL <i>Is</i>	REDEMPTION <i>Can</i>	CONSUMMATION <i>Will</i>
Kingdom of God <i>all that God rules</i>	All that God created is in perfect submission to His rule.	The created order is corrupted by sin and is in rebellion.	Through Christ, God's Kingdom is made available through repentance. It is no longer impossible to obey.	Creation will be healed and sin done away with allowing the redeemed to live in the new creation in perfect submission to God's reign.
Image Bearers	Humanity is created in the Image of God and declared "very good."	The Image of God, still present in humanity, is corrupted and distorted through sin.	Through sanctification, the redeemed are being renewed in the image of their Creator.	When Christ returns the redeemed will appear with Him in glory – His image finally and forever restored.
Dwelling Place of God	God dwelt with humanity in the garden.	Humanity is expelled from the garden and a sacrificial system is established.	The Holy Spirit indwells the redeemed, but God is still experienced indirectly.	God dwells with the redeemed in the new creation.
Vocation	Work was a meaningful sequel to being created in God's image.	Work, although still a reflection of God's image, is corrupted by the Fall and becomes painful toil.	Though still done in a broken world, in Christ work is done to the glory of God and for the common good.	Vocational structures will be healed along with the rest of creation and work will no longer produce alienation.

In addition, looking at themes and issues in the broader context of the story often helps explain why portions of the Bible seem to be conflicting. Because issues and themes are shaped and change as they pass through the story, one would expect that various topics would evolve with the story.

***The framework helps us look with the word at the world.*** The framework can also provide scriptural insight into social, cultural, and vocational issues, whether these issues are mentioned explicitly in the Bible or not. As creational structures, society, culture, and vocation all pass through the same chapters of the gospel. By applying *ought-is-can-will* to any issue one can begin to see the issue in a biblical light.

In the same way, the everyday words *ought, is, can,* and *will* are verbal clues that appear in daily conversation. These words relate everyday conversations, news stories, or even op-ed pieces to biblical themes and the biblical narrative.

## Conclusion

The Bible uses the terms “good news” and “gospel” in reference to the culmination and fulfillment of all that God has planned and promised to His people. These terms are also used to describe what each individual must do to enter into these blessings. Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Life in the kingdom has been made available to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

By including both creation and consummation in our concept of the gospel, we provide the context needed to understand God’s purpose and actions in history. This context reveals God’s world-affirming view of the created order; He has been redeeming all of creation since the Fall of humanity. Without this context, our faith is limited to our personal

experience.

But the inclusion of creation and consummation should never be to the exclusion of the Fall and redemption. Without a clear understanding of sin and its deadly effect, one would lack the motivation to move toward God in repentance. The kingdom of heaven is at hand and available to those who repent.

The gospel, when viewed through the four chapters of the kingdom story, helps eliminate doctrinal distortions. Without the *Creation* and *Consummation* chapters, faith has little to say about God’s purpose for humanity here and now. Without the *Fall* and *Redemption* chapters, there is no good news; the kingdom of God is at hand, but it is not accessible.

Christ has inaugurated the kingdom of God and the redemption of all things, and we eagerly wait to see it fully consummated on the last day. As we wait, the church is called to bear witness to the whole gospel in the whole world for the purposes of redemption (John 1). The incredible news is that even now, through union with Christ, we are fellow workers with God.

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1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 21 and 23.

2. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 15 -16.

3. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Electronic Database*, (MoodyPress, 1962).