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God's Big Story

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STORIES ARE ESSENTIAL TO LIFE. To live and breathe means to be involved in story. We cannot escape this reality. National stories, cultural stories, and family stories have all helped shape our personal stories. Everyone has one. We love epics that take us outside of ourselves and yet connect us with something deep within that we sense is true, just, and beautiful requiring courage and sacrifice. Throughout history all cultures—whether oral, literary or technological—tell their stories and look for meaning through their stories. War and romance keep the story alive: good and evil; being a part of something bigger than oneself; and believing in and loving something or someone enough to die for preserving it, all weave together a compelling story.

The power of story is undeniable. We are made for story. We are part of the story of both war and romance. We are part of God's big story!

Why all this talk of story in a guide for leadership? It is simple. **Our leadership depends on the extent to which we understand, are consumed by, and able to convey and live out this story.** Our effectiveness is contingent upon the measure to which we can link the personal stories of those to whom we minister to God's story. Broken lives require healing; broken hearts need binding up; a broken world cries for peace. **We have no remedy outside of God's big story.** Only He, having created, also has the power to redeem what He has created. Only through Him is transfor-

mation possible.

We, as leaders, must be in touch with our own awareness of being lost, a deep brokenness and inability to access health and wholeness apart from grace. We must have compassion for the people we serve and realize they, too, are broken and unable to help themselves outside of God's grace and mercy. We must have a passion for the world in which we live and

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comprehend its utter brokenness and moral poverty in establishing any real justice outside the grace of God.

In order to lead, we must be theologians—students of God and His story. We will not fully live lives of love until we not only have read, studied and understand His story, but are transformed by it. When our own hearts become engaged with the eternal romance of Jehovah's passion for His people and our minds, by the divine intrigue of the holy war for them and for their homeland, only then, will the love of God compel us to unabashed and unashamed zeal for the fulfillment of His purposes in our lives, in the church and in the world.

Why Biblical Theology?

As we explore God's story progressively revealed over 1500 years and the unity of the message of the two testaments, we enter the domain of Biblical theology which gives us a framework for making sense of the whole Bible. Resonant with consistent themes and motifs as the amazing story unwinds, it tells of a Holy God who so loves a people that He creates them and literally goes to hell to rescue them from the Evil One and their own corruption. The story itself is interesting enough but the mystery lies in its power to save through the promises made and fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled.

A God, timeless and unchanging Himself, enters time and space, His own creation, to live and die for the people He loves. Through His resurrection, ascension and now from His throne, He sends His Spirit to dwell within His people and make them holy. He promises to return and

gather them to bring them to live with Him bodily, perfected and at home in a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness. II Peter 3: 11-13

The study of Biblical theology not only enlarges our minds and is good for knowledge, but it melts our hearts and is good for wisdom. **We are transformed from being His enemies to being His friends** to being His family not only for this life, but forever. The knowledge of this informs every aspect of our earthly lives and gives an incredible hope for recovery from the deceit in our hearts and the darkness in our world. This wisdom is what under girds our faith in times of affliction and suffering and causes us to know that glory awaits and, meanwhile, character is forged.

The David Story: Biblical Theology is Practical Theology

In his book, *Leap Over A Wall*, Eugene Peterson reflects on the life of David—full of stories connected to the God who is working His purposes out in a real person within real history.

What do these stories tell us about living this human life well, living it totally? Primarily and mostly they tell us that it means dealing with God. It means dealing with a lot of other things as well: danger and parents and enemies and friends and lovers and children and wives and pride and humiliation and rejection and siblings and sickness and death and sexuality and justice and fear and peace—to say nothing of diapers and faxes and breakfast and traffic jams and clogged drainpipes and bounced checks. But always, at the forefront and in the background of circumstances, events, and people, it's God. It's always God with whom we have to do. And the God with whom we have to do can never be dealt with in an antiseptic theological laboratory as a specialty of heaven, but only on this earth—weather, digestion, family, job, government—define the context in which we deal with God.

The David story is simultaneously earthy and godly. A common error in our quest to live well is to set up a model that we then attempt to emulate. The model shows us what we can become, a per-

fection to which we can aspire. But it also continuously shows us what we aren't yet, how far we have to go. After we try this for a while, it turns out that most of us don't have much good to say about models. They have an honored place in museums, and some of them seem to make a great deal of money posing for photographers and getting their pictures in magazines, but they don't seem to help us much in getting the hang of becoming human. The Bible is conspicuously lacking in models; what it's full of is stories—like the David story.

The David story, like most other Bible stories, presents us not with a polished ideal to which we aspire but with a rough-edged actuality in which we see humanity being formed—the God presence in the earth/human conditions. The David story immerses us in a reality that embraces the entire range of humanness, stretching from the deep interior of our souls to the farthest reach of our imaginations. No other Biblical story has this range to it, showing the many dimensions of height, depth, breadth and length of human experience as a person comes alive before God—aware of God, responsive to God. We're never more alive than when we're dealing with God. And there's a sense in which we aren't alive at all (in the uniquely human sense of 'alive') until we're dealing with God. David deals with God. As an instance of humanity in himself, he isn't much. He has little wisdom to pass on to us on how to live successfully. He was an unfortunate parent and an unfaithful husband. From a purely historical point of view, he was a purely barbaric chieftain with a talent for poetry. But David's importance isn't in his morality or his military prowess but in his experience of and witness to God. Every event in his life was a confrontation with God.

So we see this theological exercise of knowing Biblical theology is so very practical and necessary in order to see that the Bible is not just a string of isolated stories. All Scripture is like a hall of mirrors reflecting the image of Christ and His Kingdom from beginning to end if we but have the eyes to see. In those stories full of people with moral pockmarks, seemingly hopeless cycles of destruction, inability to grasp the nature of faith, God confronts and pursues them with His truth and love which cannot be denied.

The Story Revealed

The purpose of this chapter is a brief overview of this area of study. It is not meant to be a study itself in Biblical theology, only a cursory look. The real and serious study must go on for a lifetime as we continue to see Christ as the fulfillment of the covenant that God made with His people. The story must not only be understood, but lived out in our own lives. A bibliography at the end of this chapter will list books that will push the door of the mind open for deeper study. This list is meant to be used as

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both resources as well as texts for group study. Once we understand the central message and the framework of God's story of salvation, our minds will begin to connect the dots of the history, poetry, prophecy and letters of the Bible and begin to see one story with many facets told over and in different forms. The depth of the love and purpose of God it portrays is humbling. For the purposes of this chapter, we will look at the covenant of grace expressed through various times and people and the growing picture of the puzzle being assembled.

First, let's look through the lens of a Pauline epistle to see the story in a nutshell:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began; and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher; which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am

convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. II Timothy 1:8-12

Very succinctly, Paul has given us a way of understanding a framework for the Bible. God purposed a people for Himself that would live with Him forever in the joy of holiness. Since an inherent holiness was impossible for those whom God created to enjoy Him (Adam and Eve), He gave His grace in Christ before the beginning of time (the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world) –Revelation 13:8—but through time He made

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His plan known, and in time is accomplishing the salvation of His people from sin. Christ's coming the first time fulfilled the promises that gave hope to His people of a sure and certain rescue and was a living testimony of the great love He has for them. The Spirit who resides in all who believe and in the church is therefore given as a deposit of the promised future and as the one who enables transformation into Christ likeness. The Gospel gives life to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. His people are entrusted with this life-giving message as they entrust to Him the fulfillment of all they have ever desired in His second appearance.

When we understand our destiny, our value, our mission on this earth, our purpose in things—both big and small—becomes ever more informed and satisfied. Things that do not make sense to us are yet able to be accepted as part of the process of becoming more holy—more like Him. We begin to understand practically what it means that the things that are seen are temporal but those unseen are eternal. The scope of Biblical history transforms a dusty book to very relevant book for our everyday lives because in it we see the heart of God beating for His people—pursuing them in love, conquering death and capturing a hope and future beyond our emptiness of life we have all experienced. Our suffering

has meaning; our joy has meaning; our souls have a resting place.

As leaders, this hope must burn brightly despite the winds that seek to blow out the flame. Our understanding of **God's story, the persistence throughout the ages and the great reality of His love makes a difference in our hearts.** They not only convince us; they transform us. It is the truth of the story which transforms us—the good news of the Gospel told throughout the Bible, in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic—in history, narrative, poetry, prophecy—all telling about a God who dies so His people might live.

A Relational Covenant

God's covenant with His people is the major theme of the Bible that explores this vital relationship. It is about a God who binds His affection to an undeserving people to give them a name, a progeny, a place. A related motif is the kingdom—a sovereign whose people bear His name, grow in numbers and inhabit a place. Equally, we speak of a shepherd who gathers His flock and brings them to safe pastures.

Through watching the covenant of grace of God to His people throughout Scripture, the substance of the story progressively revealed, increases with clarity. The thread of continuity tightens, Adam and Eve are in covenant with God—a covenant of works. One thing is asked of them—to eat from one tree in a garden of delectable delights in the land of plenty. But, like us, she/he makes a bee line to the very thing denied. In that one act, the curtain falls and mankind meets its ruin (Genesis 3). As J. I. Packer says:

God was happy without man before man was made; He would have continued happy had He simply destroyed man after man had sinned; but as it is He has set His love upon particular sinners, and this means that by His own free voluntary choice, He will not know perfect and unmixed happiness again till He has brought every one of them to heaven. HE has in effect resolved that henceforth for all eternity His happiness shall be conditional upon ours. Thus God saves, not only for His glory, but also for His gladness. This goes far to explain why it is that there is joy (God's own joy) in the presence of the angels when a sinner repents (Luke 15:10), and why there will be 'ex-

ceeding joy' when God sets us faultless at the last day in His own holy presence (Jude 24). The thought passes understanding and almost beggars belief, but there is no doubt that, according to Scripture, such is the love of God.

From the beginning of time, when God created man, His truth and love pursuing them were evident. The word *hesed* is the one that describes a faithful, continual love of God for His people. We come to understand it as that covenant bond of God with His people: I AM your God' you are my people. Nothing in heaven nor earth will be able to separate God's people from this love (Romans 8:38-39). We see this right from the beginning.

The truth of God's holiness was brought to bear on **Adam and Eve** through a covenant of works – “do not eat of the tree lest you die.” Evil entered the story and sin was evident. “Like Adam, they have broken the covenant. The one thing that Eve/Adam could not do – that is, to be holy—Christ did and so fulfilled the covenant of works—only much later. (Romans 5:12-21) Being God *and* man, in their stead they were faithful to **me**. He accomplished this for all time. God, who loves His people and is gathering them to dwell with them in holiness, has prepared His people through their own history. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (I Corinthians 14:22)

Through **Noah**, He calls His people and provides a way of escape in a generation whose every inclination of thought had become evil all the time (Genesis 6:5). As we see in the Garden of Eden, judgment accompanies mercy. So the whole earth is destroyed and yet eight people are saved because a “righteous” man believes God and builds an ark that takes him and his family to safety in a land. Already -- as in the garden—we see God, His people, a land. Against these, we see evil that must be judged because of the nature of the One who has created and the One who is bent on redemption of a holy people to dwell with Him.

We might already think, even as leaders that this sounds like a fairy tale and that is fine, well and good but does not intersect our lives in a meaningful way. Yet, we think in our own day of all the evils we face—sexual trafficking, rampant and mindless violence, undeniable addictions, genocide, governmental corruption—for which we desire judgment and the evil in

our own hearts from which we hunger for freedom. Do we not long for the flood and ark of deliverance? Is that longing not for God Himself?

Through **Abraham**, He calls this people and promises that a nation, whose numbers are increased, will inhabit a land and be given a name. In Genesis 12, 15 and 17, we see these promises and the ceremony of covenant that binds this sovereign to this people even to His death (Genesis 15:9-21). He asks of them again what they desire to give Him but can-

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not—holiness. As He “cuts” covenant with Abraham, He swears even to hold up their side of the agreement at the cost of His life.

The Reality of the Message

Is this not the Gospel message? A God desires holiness which we cannot deliver though we might desperately desire to do so . Even though our lack of it is incriminating and toxic to us, He is wounded for our transgression (Isaiah 53:5) and actually takes on our sin (II Corinthians 5:21). Is this only a theological concept? **Is this not a reality that breaks our hearts, a truth that sets us free?** Free to live holy lives, free to love others as ourselves, free to spread the Good News of this amazing love.

Through **Moses**, He calls His people out of slavery in Egypt to a place of worship and a land flowing with milk and honey, the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:12-14). Through Moses, He gives this nation a moral law, the basis for civil law to live by and a holy priesthood to carry out the sacrifices demanded due to their sin. The sacrificial system given demonstrates the inability of His people to carry out the law also given.

We learn in the New Testament that which is obvious in the Old Testament as well—that there must be a righteousness given outside-the-law. (Hebrews 10:1-4; Romans 1:16-17, 10:4). What God has been saying all

along in historical and cultural ways, He makes ever more evident. He spoke in shadows and types (Hebrews 10) but through Christ has spoken in a clearer fashion (Hebrews 1). Man was never able to live holy except in Christ. Before creation itself Christ agreed to the Father's plan to come to earth and live a holy life and die for sin, and be resurrected to conquer death. The Spirit made this possible.

Through **David**, He calls His people as a shepherd giving them "peace" in the land. His presence and dwelling with His people, evident in the garden, evident with Noah, increasingly with Moses through the bush, cloud and fire and the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle, finds

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a resting place in the temple in Jerusalem. This temple, the place of God's dwelling with His people, is not built by David but by his son Solomon. Through David comes the promise of perpetuity on the throne. A descendant of David will reign forever on the throne of the people of God. (II Samuel 7:8;13). His name will be made great and the people will settle into a land of peace and prosperity.

Does this sound like something out of an ancient history book, a fairy tale, or actually the desire not only of your own heart, but the desire of the One who made you for Himself? Could this be reality? It is real. It is God working His purposes out. What He promised Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, He not only has promised us but has fulfilled, is fulfilling, will fulfill us. He has identified us with Christ and has given Him the name above all names. He has gathered a growing nation of people made up of a growing number of tribes, languages, and tongues and He has gone into the throne room of His Father and ours to secure a place for us. His purpose is for a holy people to dwell with Him in the home of righteousness (II Peter 3:10-14; Revelation 19:7-8; Colossians 1:28-29; Ephesians 5:25-27).

Woven Through the Testaments

Through the Old Testament, this promise was fulfilled in shadow and types but the covenant of grace finds its culmination in the Christ of the New Covenant – the One who knows the burden of the law is too heavy and asks us to come to Him for rest. He is the One who wants to write the law on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) which He turns from stone to flesh (Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:24-28) and quickens us to life (Ezekiel 37). Through Him, all promises are fulfilled (II Corinthians 1:20-21).

The love of God so strong, so true (Ephesians 3:17b-19) comes to earth to dwell among us (John 1:14). As was the tent of the tabernacle as Israel roamed and the glory of the ark, as was the temple as Israel settled into a land, so Christ came and “pitched His tent” (John 1:14) among us to dwell with us. We learn that He is the temple, not a building made with hands (Matthew 12:16; 26:61) through His resurrection, we are His temple awaiting His return, (I Corinthians 3:16, 6:9, II Corinthians 6:16) until the time when there is no temple because “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple in the city of God” (Revelation 21:22,23).

God is determined to have His people (the church) gathered in a place (the new heavens and the new earth) in order to dwell with them (Revelation 21:1-4). Whereas at one time in history God’s people were called Israel and the place of His dwelling was the temple in the city of Jerusalem. He was forming a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God—the church (the true Israel) in whom He dwells.

The Importance to Leaders

As Christian leaders, we are entrusted with this life-giving truth. **The power of the Gospel is one that cannot be contained.** We must understand the depth of love with which we are loved (Ephesians 3: 17-19; Romans 8:38-39) in an incarnational way. This love must drive out the fears that distort our lives and love. As we live and love in the community of faith in the context of a secular world, this love will be stronger than the darkness. It will not only shed light on life’s complexities but bring the oil of the Spirit of life to heal.

When extreme love is demanded of us—patience, kindness, forbearance, goodness, self-control—we know the Source of it and remember His

love for us and the call to holiness. It frees us from legalistic addictions without giving us over to libertine self-indulgences. As leaders with followers, **we want to know the Story that sets the stage upon which we live for eternity**— that which brings life and is indeed, life.

Reflection Questions:

- In what ways do you see your personal story as part of God’s bigger story and purposes? Have you ever considered yourself to be a “theologian”? If not, why not?
- How does gaining a theological understanding of God’s work in our lives and in our world impact the role of a leader?
- II Timothy 1: 8-12 reveals Paul’s succinct, but in depth understanding of the story. Anything less is not the complete story. What aspect of the story has been a reminder to you?
- How is God’s relational covenant revealed in Adam and Eve, Abraham, Noah, Moses, David and Jesus Christ?
- How is the covenant of grace woven through the Testaments, both Old and New?
- In what ways is the reality of the Gospel, revealed in your personal life? In your life as a leader?

Get to Know the Writer

Susan Nash is a sinner saved by grace. Born first into a family of 5 children, she has always loved family and adores her 3 nieces and nephew and her great niece. Her larger family is the family of faith who has been a testimony to her of God's committed love. Her treasure in this life is her relationship with her God and Father through His Son and by means of His Spirit. His presence is her comfort in this life and hope for the future. She has written, taught, spoken, lead and served for Him in two churches and in 28 foreign countries.

For Further Reading: God's Big Story

According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible by Graeme Goldsworthy

Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments by Geerhardus Vos
Classic seminary textbook on Biblical Theology. For the serious student.

Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption by Michael P. Williams

God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology
by Michael S. Horton

God's Big Picture: Tracing the storyline of the Bible
by Vaughn Roberts

God's Unfolding Purpose by Suzanne de Dietrich

Look to the Rock by Alec Motyer

Promise and Deliverance by S. G. De Graaf

The Christ of the Covenants by O. Palmer Robertson

The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Send the Light by Graeme Goldsworthy

The Unfolding Mystery by Edmund Clowney