

HOW *and understand* TO READ THE BIBLE

Meeting God in the book you love but never fully understood



LARRY RICHARDS

If you want a fresh and insightful overview of the Scriptures, Dr. Larry Richards' newest contribution to biblical scholarship, *How to Read (and Understand) the Bible*, is for you. This refreshing approach to understanding the Scriptures is insightful, stimulating, trustworthy, and creatively instructive. With authentic biblical scholarship, combined with practical applications, you will travel through the entire Bible, gaining new appreciation for God's great gift to us on every page. Bible students and lay readers alike will gain an enriched perspective and understanding of God's Word.

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Preface

EVER SINCE I consciously committed my life to Jesus Christ in 1951 while serving in the US Navy, I have loved God's Word. Knowing little about it at the outset, I started a noontime Bible study on my base and was led deeper and deeper into the wisdom of Scripture. I had been familiar with Jesus from my childhood, but as the study group explored the Gospels and Romans, I was gripped by an awareness of Christ's ability to transform our lives and give them meaning. In particular, I saw that transformation in the life of a shy, young civilian worker on our base, a woman named Lee. For six months, Lee came to the Bible study every day, but she never said a word. A few years later, when I visited the base after leaving the navy, I was invited to Lee's home, where eighteen men and women who had come to know Christ through her witness were gathered. God had used the fruit of a little Bible study I had started to transform and mature the lives of almost twenty people. I now understood the true power of God's Word to change our hearts.

Following my time in the navy, I attended Dallas Theological Seminary, taught for a time at Wheaton College, and then launched a writing career that to date has produced some 250 books, every one deeply rooted in Scripture.

It may seem strange that after sixty years of study, I would write a

book about “meeting God in the book you love but never fully understood.” But I encounter so many people today who see the Bible as a rule book, or a book packed with stories that teach morals. They believe in Jesus, but don’t fully grasp the magnitude of what God is doing—in history and in their own lives. So I began to reread the Bible as *story*—the story of God’s purpose in the universe he created, and how we believers fit into God’s story to make his story *our* story too.

In reading the Bible as story, I discovered for the first time just how intent God is on fashioning an eternal community of love, and that along history’s way, he wants us to experience as much of that community of love as we are willing to accept.

In many ways, my understanding of God changed. I was stunned to see the importance of the little, daily choices you and I make. I came to see how, in his sovereign flexibility, God walks through life with us, responding to our prayers and guiding the outcome of the choices we freely make. I came to wonder at the greatness of a God who responds so generously to us, yet never wavers from the grand future embedded in his covenant promises and overall plan.

I was also gripped by the role of God’s antagonist, Satan, as he struggles to spoil God’s story for you and me. But most of all, I met God afresh in the book I loved but had never fully understood. I not only came to know him better, but also to love him more deeply and respond to him more joyfully.

Each chapter in the book you’re about to read begins with a description of a pivotal event, which introduces an important theme for understanding the Bible and understanding God. We’ll then explore these themes, providing keys to help you read and understand Scripture. It’s my prayer and my confident expectation that as you follow God’s story through his Word, you too will come to know and love him better.

Larry Richards
Raleigh, North Carolina

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*As you read the
Old Testament, remember . . .*

IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE

Genesis 1–2

The Pivotal Event

The first man opened his eyes and looked around.

What a beautiful place this is. But what is it? Where am I?

He raised himself on one elbow, puzzled now. He heard bees buzzing and smelled the fragrance of ripening fruit. Flowers in riotous colors bloomed all around him. The sky above sparkled an azure blue, illuminating currents that seemed to flow across the heavens.

And who am I?

Slowly Adam stood up, unaware that he was naked.

Digging Deeper into Genesis 1–2

I'm impressed with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective, Sherlock Holmes. He's so aware of the little things. Brown stains on a thumb and forefinger; the way the cuff of a left pant leg shows more wear than

the right. Nothing at all like his companion, Dr. Watson, who might notice someone waving his arms and shouting, but who always misses the subtler clues, the things that speak volumes to Holmes.

If Holmes and Watson were called in to investigate the Bible's creation account, I suspect that Watson would immediately see what most of us do. But Holmes would find meanings that others miss.

Our first impressions of Genesis are much like recognizing the type of broad, sweeping gestures that even Dr. Watson couldn't miss. Visualizing the act of creation, we're overwhelmed at the awesome power of a God who can call worlds into existence with a word. Yet there are other clues in the first chapters of Genesis that are more understated and suggestive—the types of clues that Sherlock Holmes would detect, clues that tell us much about the central figure of the Bible's story and set up the story itself. If we focus primarily on the grand gestures, we may miss the more elusive clues embedded in the Creator's words and actions. Still, we mustn't discount the significance conveyed in the overarching grandeur of God's creative act.

The Major Message of Creation

In the opening words of Genesis, God steps boldly onstage: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Because of the magnificence of creation, the apostle Paul will later write, some knowledge of God is the common heritage of all humankind: “Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.”¹

What Paul means is that the universe is so obviously supernatural, so clearly a God thing, that no one can miss its significance. The universe need not *contend* for God; its very existence bears witness to God's existence and to his awesome, overwhelming, complete, and eternal power. The message of creation is a proclamation, not an argument.

For no argument is necessary. The very shape of creation—its vastness, order, and symmetry—says all that needs to be said. “God has made it plain,”² Paul insists. It’s as if the universe were a transmitter, constantly broadcasting a single message, and human beings were fashioned with a built-in receiver tuned to its single frequency. A person may turn down the volume to a whisper. But it is impossible to silence creation’s voice entirely.

The “great power and mighty strength”³ of the God revealed in creation might hold terror for those who don’t know him. But those of us who see ourselves as part of God’s story find that his overwhelming power offers comfort and assurance.

Jesus put it this way to his disciples: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. . . . My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”⁴ The God we meet in the Genesis creation account is, simply put, *greater than all*. And we have the assurance, as followers of Jesus Christ, that we are held, secure, in God’s mighty hand.

The grand proclamation of creation—of God’s existence and mighty power—is something we must keep in mind as we read the Bible. There will be times when things don’t go the way we think they should. There will be moments when it seems as if God’s purposes have failed, when we might think that God himself must be distressed at the way history unfolds. At such moments, we must remember the message of creation—namely, that God, the Creator of all things from one end of the universe to the other, has unlimited power and unequalled strength. He doesn’t stumble through history as we do, peering anxiously ahead and haplessly fumbling away opportunity after opportunity. No, the God introduced in Genesis 1 is far greater than his creation, far superior to any created being. Whatever happens along the way, Scripture’s unwavering message is that God’s purposes will prevail. His power and his mighty strength *guarantee* it.

When we read the Bible, most of us understand the broad gestures,

such as the Bible’s sweeping claim that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. We understand this to mean that God is distinct from and greater than the material universe; that the lifeless sprang from the heart and mind of a living person. But to simply affirm that God exists and that he made all things does not mean we are living within Scripture’s narrative.

Dr. Dan Allender, a well-known Christian counselor, tells of a time when he visited New Zealand. One morning as he was hiking, he came to a point of land. Spread out before him was a spectacular range of snow-capped mountains, towering into a vivid blue sky. Overwhelmed by the majesty of the spectacle, Dan found himself filled with praise and thanking God.

Another hiker came out on the point, and his face, too, showed awe and wonder. “It’s unbelievable, isn’t it?” the newcomer whispered.

Dan nodded and then asked, “So who do you thank?”

The newcomer looked puzzled. “*Thank?* What do you mean?”

Telling the story later, Allender commented, “I felt so sad for him.”

Dan Allender lives within the narrative of Scripture, allowing his perspective of life and his experiences to be shaped by Scripture’s revelation. When he encounters the beauty of creation, it turns his thoughts to the Creator and fills his heart with praise and thanksgiving. The other hiker he met that morning lived within a different narrative. The beauty of creation overwhelmed him with awe, but he had no one to thank.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, concludes that humans are without excuse because God has revealed himself in his creation—and “although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.”⁵ The test of a vital relationship with God isn’t found in the creeds we recite or in the truths we claim to believe. It’s found in our response to God’s revelation of himself—not only in creation but also in Scripture and in the person of his Son, Jesus.

Misreading the Narrative

During the past few hundred years, we've been conditioned to look into the Bible and ask certain kinds of questions: *How did (or could) this happen? When did it happen? How can we explain this rationally and scientifically? What evidence is there that our explanation is correct?*

This mind-set, characteristic of what philosophers call *modernism*, has dramatically affected the way most people read Genesis 1 and 2. The modernist mind-set has led us into conflict with non-Christians and into heated debates with our fellow believers. The questions we've asked—and disagreed on the answers to—include such things as, How old is the earth? Do the “days” recorded in Genesis 1 refer to consecutive twenty-four-hour periods? Can a “day” represent a geologic age? Did God create life forms in a *day*, and then permit them to evolve through an *age* extending for millions of years?

Because such questions can't be settled by simply referring to the text of Scripture, we've often tried to answer them by attempting to harmonize Scripture with the shifting views of the scientific community. But science is ultimately nothing more than a different narrative, whose constantly changing paradigms about the nature of reality make it an unreliable tool for understanding God's Word. Perhaps we should wonder why we even ask the kinds of questions that recent generations have found so fascinating.

Some would argue that we raise the questions and use the tools of science to demonstrate that our belief in the God of the Bible is logically defensible. But Scripture reminds us that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”⁶ When Paul, while he was with the Corinthians, “resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified,”⁷ he consciously rejected reliance on “the wisdom of this age.”⁸ Paul was convinced that the gospel is self-authenticating. He did not have to argue against or according to first-century philosophy; he

simply had to present God’s message clearly and trust the Holy Spirit to convict and convince.

In our day, we have no need to argue against or according to contemporary scientific theories or perspectives. Like Paul, we simply need to relate the story of God’s Word and trust the Holy Spirit to draw people to faith.

Looking at the Clues

If we look beyond the big-picture aspects of Creation, the first two chapters of Genesis provide fascinating clues to the nature of God’s story.

We notice immediately, for instance, that a particular word, *good*, appears seven times in the first chapter and five times in the second. As God fashioned our world, he paused again and again to look at what he had done. The narrative repeatedly tells us, “God saw that it was good.”⁹ As God evaluates his work, we sense his delight and satisfaction in what he has accomplished. And God’s evaluation provides vital insights into his character and his story.

The word *good* first appears in the description of an event that takes place on the first day of creation. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.”¹⁰

We notice immediately that God considers light *good*. He also distinguishes between light and darkness. Clearly, God does not see darkness as good. Without knowing any more than this, we understand that it’s important to *see* and to *be seen*. Anything less falls short of being *good*.

As each new day unfolds in the story, God makes other distinctions as well. He divides the earth’s surface into land and sea. He creates vegetation and animal forms that reproduce after their kind. Scholars

have studied the use of the word *kind* in Scripture, in an effort to find a fit with classifications used by botanists and zoologists. But *kind* simply does not fit the usual categories of phylum, genus, family, and species. Yet each “kind” in Scripture is distinguished from every other kind, and one kind cannot reproduce with another. God calls this distinction *good*.

The text also indicates that the *consistency* in creation’s design is part of what makes it so good in God’s sight. The reliable rotation of the earth allows day to follow night in an unbroken cycle so regularly that we are able to mark the passage of weeks and months and years. Season consistently follows season. The stars sail majestically in the night skies, their courses so stable that men will one day use them to chart their journeys and find their way. All this, God calls *good*.

On the sixth day, God created a human being, a life form “in his own image”¹¹—yet, like the animals, created male and female. God blessed the human pair and told them to “fill the earth and subdue it”¹²—a phrase that suggests we are to *care* for the earth, not exploit it. On this sixth day, God looked at what he had made and deemed it *very good*. Again we sense his satisfaction and delight.

In evaluating his own work in the opening pages of the Bible’s story, God opens himself to our scrutiny. By declaring what he sees as *good*, he opens a window into his character and personality, providing us with deep insights into the person whose story is told throughout the Bible. As we learn what he values—what seems *good* and *right* to him—we find ourselves in agreement with God.

It is good to make distinctions, to evaluate, select out, and choose.

It is good to have light, to be able to see where we are and where we’re going. It is good to see and know others, and to be seen and known by them.

It is good to live in a stable universe rather than amid random chaos.

We feel more comfortable in a world marked by regularity and

consistency. Uncertainty creates anxiety; instability makes us fearful. In order to feel secure, we need the kind of universe that God created.

Seeing all the *good* in the early chapters of Genesis as a revelation of God's character and nature helps us feel more comfortable with him. We realize that he and we have much in common. As we agree with our Creator about what is good in the world he fashioned, we underscore the truth that we are made in God's image. And as we learn more of God's story in the Bible, we'll find that its narrative fits us better and better. God's story provides a framework within which we feel comfortable, a narrative that rings true.

The events described in Genesis 2 amplify what we've seen in Genesis 1. When I hear some scholars speak of two creation accounts, one in Genesis 1 and another in Genesis 2, I suspect they haven't watched much television. If they had, they might be more familiar with a common strategy that helps viewers follow the action. First, the director will set up an *establishing shot*, a wide-angle view that defines the context in which the action takes place. Then he or she will zoom in to focus on what's most significant within that scene.

This is how the Bible handles the creation story. Genesis 1 is an establishing shot, defining the setting (the creation of the universe) in which the rest of the story will unfold. In this way, the writer tells us that the most significant event in the creation story is the fashioning of human beings. What we have in Genesis 1 and 2 are not two (conflicting) creation stories but one story shot with two cameras, if you will. In Genesis 2, the author simply returns to the sixth day and provides a close-up, detailing God's creation of humanity.

As we carefully read the Genesis 2 account, we realize that it's a close-up shot of the scene established in Genesis 1:27: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them."

As we zoom in on the action, we see that these beings created in God's image are special. Whereas the rest of the created universe

sprang into existence at a word, here God stoops to personally fashion Adam's body from the dust of the earth—and then he breathes his own life into Adam.

Next, the text portrays Adam's early years in Eden, a garden shaped especially for him. In the account of Adam's life in Eden, the likeness between the man and his Creator is further emphasized. There in the Garden, Adam does far more than explore his environment. He explores his own nature—and God's nature as well. In the emotions that Adam experiences in response to the natural world,¹³ he discovers his—and God's—capacity to take pleasure in beauty. In working and caring for the Garden,¹⁴ Adam discovers that he—like God—derives deep satisfaction from performing meaningful work. In his freedom to eat from any tree in the Garden,¹⁵ Adam learns that he—like God—can draw distinctions and choose between options. In responding to God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,¹⁶ Adam learns that he—like God—can make moral choices. When God permits Adam to name the animals, Adam learns that he—like God—has intellectual abilities that allow him to share in the act of creation. In Scripture, names express something of the essence of the thing named; thus, to give something, or someone, a name is to mold reality.

The sheer act of creation tells us that God is great and powerful, awesome beyond measure. The description of his fashioning of Adam points to how special Adam is. And Adam's experience in Eden, like the use of the word *good*, helps us feel comfortable with the Creator. He made us in his image and likeness, and we have much in common.

But there's another, more subtle indicator in early Genesis that we don't want to miss. God states, "Let *us* make mankind in *our* image."¹⁷ In view of subsequent revelation that the Creator is one God in three persons, it's best to understand the plural as an early expression of God's trinitarian nature.

The Bible tells us that "God is love."¹⁸ It portrays the relationship between the persons of the Trinity as a perfect harmony, as a continual

giving and receiving of love. The stunning truth revealed here is that God himself exists in community.

In Genesis 2:20, we're told that when Adam finished naming the animals, "no suitable helper was found" for him. Adam had no one to love and no one of his kind to love him. Yet God's stated purpose was to create human beings in his image and likeness. It was not enough for Adam to appreciate beauty, to find satisfaction in work, or to make moral choices. Adam also had to love and be loved. For Adam to truly reflect the image of God, he too must have someone distinct from but of the same essence as himself, so he could love and be loved in return. No wonder God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."¹⁹

If we wonder why God created Adam first and Eve at a later time, perhaps it's because Adam needed time to discover that he was alone, time to sense his need for others of his kind. When Adam's ache of loneliness had grown intolerable, God acted to make a "suitable helper" for him,²⁰ someone who differed from Adam and yet shared his essence. In Adam's words, Eve was someone who was "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh";²¹ someone with whom he could "be fruitful and multiply," and expand the community within which humans are called to live.

Together, the trinitarian "let us" of Genesis 1:26 and the "not good for the man to be alone" of Genesis 2:18 lead us to a conclusion that helps shape our understanding of God's story and of our own stories as well. God's story is about *relationships*. God's story is about *love*.

God, who is love and who knows perfect love within the Trinity, created humans in his own image so that we too might love and be loved. But he did not create us to love and be loved only by each other. God created human beings for himself to love as well, and so that we might love him in return.

Already we can see that God's intention seems to be to fill the universe with everything that is good for the creatures formed in his image—creatures he has chosen to love. God seems intent on creating a

loving community within which humanity can fully experience what it means to be fashioned in God's image and likeness.

Here again we find ourselves in agreement with God. Just as the things God calls good seem good to us, so too the vision of a universe filled with love resonates in the deepest part of our being. The story told so far by the Bible fits perfectly with who we are as human beings—not necessarily with the way things *are*, but definitely with the way we yearn for things to be. In the first two chapters of Genesis, we're given a vision—not so much of the present, but of a day long past and of a new day the Bible claims is on the way.

As we move on in the story, we'll discover why that day has taken such a long time coming.

Discussion Questions

1. How have you experienced God's creation? How do you respond to creation's voice?
2. What seems to you to be especially good about creation? What does this tell you about yourself? What does it suggest about God?
3. The first pages of Genesis reveal that God's story is about relationships, about love. What are the implications for humanity if God's story truly is a love story?