

THE 52
GREATEST
STORIES
of the BIBLE

A WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

KENNETH BOA AND
JOHN ALAN TURNER



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Kenneth Boa and John Alan Turner, *The 52 Greatest Stories of the Bible*
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To our children—
Heather, Anabel, Eliza and Amelia—
who constantly remind us of the power
of a really good story.



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God's plan for humanity has always involved community, so it's no surprise that writing, like life, is best done in that context. That being the case, there are a number of people I must thank.

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Introduction

A generation ago, public discourse was littered with biblical references. Someone who endured painful circumstances without giving in to resignation and despair was said to have “the patience of Job.” Someone who demonstrated an uncanny ability to see the true nature of things was said to have “the wisdom of Solomon.” Great stories like David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion’s den and Balaam’s talking donkey were mentioned in stories and songs—both religious and popular. Everyone was at least somewhat familiar with them. But that isn’t the case anymore.

Nowadays, people don’t know many of the great stories of the Bible. They don’t know about the call of Abram from Ur or Ruth from Moab. They’ve never heard of Elijah, Josiah, Hezekiah or Nehemiah. They don’t know much about John the Baptist or Jesus’ parents or Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. These used to be stories everyone knew. But the sad truth is that now, as our society (and our churches) become increasingly biblically illiterate, many people (Christian and non-Christian) simply aren’t familiar with them.

The greatest call of the Christian life is to know God and to help others to know Him, too. But where do you begin the task of communicating the gospel to a group of people who do not know the basics? How do you approach people who aren’t even sure who God is, what sin is, who Christ is or what a Bible is for? Even more, how do you do these things when you’re not sure of their meaning yourself?

Here’s how. You learn and tell the Big Story. You go all the way back to the beginning, when God existed in perfect community with Himself. You learn how it was out of that perfect community that God spoke creation into existence,

taking time to craft an idyllic place before carefully creating humans to live there in unbroken community with each other and with their Creator. You study how the first act of disobedience toward God brought a curse as a result. You read the stories of Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel and Noah before you can appreciate the calling of Abram for what it is. Step by step through the Old Testament, you build your worldview, in order to prepare yourself for the greatest story, the story of Jesus.

Unfortunately, few Christians today know how to do such a thing. That's why this book is so important.

In the past, a great deal of effective evangelism was done by teaching key Scriptures about sin, grace and salvation. This was possible because Christians could assume the basic building blocks of a Christian worldview in their listeners. Even when people chose not to believe in God, it was the Christian God they chose not to believe in! Evangelism was rather like hanging wet laundry on a clothesline that was already in place; you could take texts like John 3:16 or Romans 5:8 or Isaiah 53:4–6 and hang them on the line of a Judeo-Christian worldview. The problem Christians have now in trying to reach postmodern people is that there is no clothesline. When we try to hang our texts, they fall to the ground in a heap. The great challenge before us now is to put up a new clothesline.

It is our hope that this book will help you do just that: connect the dots as you read the Bible and see how each individual story is really one chapter in the Big Story. We want to help you establish a Christian worldview through which you will see Jesus as the point of everything. And—this is important—we want to show you that a biblical worldview really can help you understand the answers to the ultimate questions of life.

In a postmodern and post-Christian era, many people are confused about what the Bible is and why it was written. People are looking for spirituality and ways to answer the pressing questions of life—questions of origin, destiny and morality. These people aren't very likely to pick up a commentary set or read many of the scholarly approaches to the biblical stories; they want something practical and easy to understand. We hope our book will become a guide both for people who want to know more about the Bible but don't know where to start, and for those who wish to communicate the truths of the Bible to those who have little or no experience with it but aren't sure they know it well enough themselves to do so.

We intend to take you from beginning to end of the Bible in one year, moving along without getting bogged down in the difficult passages. We'll try to stick with story and narrative, and weave the doctrine in as we go.

But first, a few brief preliminaries must be addressed. First, there's the issue of reducing the Bible down to 52 stories. It seemed like a really good idea when we first thought of it. Then our publisher wanted to know how quickly we could complete the list of stories to be included. We did what most sensible people would do: We started at the beginning.

Creation. Fall. Cain and Abel. Noah. The Tower of Babel. The Calling of Abram. The whole Ishmael debacle. The Birth of Isaac. The Sacrifice of Isaac. Jacob and Esau.

That's when we realized our first problem. We were just over halfway through the first of 66 books in the Bible, and we already had 10 stories!

On our first attempt at the list, we had 45 stories in the Old Testament alone. Clearly, this was going to take some thought.

After consulting several scholars, pastors and teachers, we finally settled on our list. And some pretty good stories got left out. Esther's not in here. Neither is Job. Obadiah and Nahum are important—you should take the time to read their books before you get to heaven and have to have an awkward conversation with them (“You wrote one of the books of the Bible?”)—but they're not in here. We chose stories that further the central plotline in significant ways. It was a difficult process, and we know that there will be some who disagree with our list. Those people are welcome to write a book of their own. (And if they do, we'll probably buy it.)

The second issue related to the list we've chosen: details. How do you tell the whole story of Israel's Judges in approximately 500 words? Because we were concerned with moving the story along and limited ourselves to only 26 stories in each of the Old and New Testaments, there are smaller stories—subplots—that got left out. You'll read about King David, but you won't read much about his encounter with Goliath. You'll read about Daniel, but you won't hear about his night in the lion's den.

This has been a difficult but intentional process, and because we've had to leave so many things out, we feel obligated to stress this next point: *This book is in no way intended to replace good, rigorous Bible study.* It is meant to supplement your Bible study. If you're like so many people who have so little time for reading and must choose between either reading our book or reading the Good Book, please put this back on the shelf.

Obviously, we haven't set out to write a textbook here. We've tried to take the scholarly stuff and distill it for mass consumption. This book is intended for use as a personal daily devotional, to help you understand the full scriptural

timeline—from creation to eternity—by showing how these great individual stories all come together into a much larger, cohesive narrative. Hopefully, by taking this approach, you'll be challenged to see your life as another part of this continually unfolding Story.

Each week will focus on one story and follow a deliberate pattern:

- Monday's reading will be the story itself. We've tried to tell the story as conversationally as possible, including details about the story's historical context.
- Tuesday will focus on the *orthodoxy* of the story, a description of how the story shapes our *beliefs*.
- Wednesday will key into the *orthopathy* of the story, a discussion of how the story shapes our *values*.
- Thursday will delve into the *orthopraxy* of the story, an explanation of how the story should shape our *actions*.
- Friday will conclude the week's study and will guide the reader through a prayerful response to the story.

As you can see, we've taken a specific approach to unpacking each Bible story. Along with Christians throughout the centuries, we maintain that our faith must not be reduced to merely a set of right beliefs (orthodoxy) or right values (orthopathy) or right behaviors (orthopraxy), but must take all three and intertwine them to form a well-rounded faith that redeems our thoughts, our feelings and our actions.

One final note as to the style you're about to encounter. When two authors agree to write one book, there is always some debate over whose voice to use. We are two very different men with very different backgrounds. Ken is one of the most respected thinkers in all of Christendom. John is . . . well . . . few people have heard of John before. Ken has a doctorate in philosophy from Oxford. John . . . well . . . John is a teaching pastor, and while he likes to talk about Jesus and God and the Bible a lot, he works really hard to make sure he uses language regular folks can understand.

For reasons that aren't even completely clear to us, John ended up writing the material for the first four days of each week, while Ken supplied the guided prayers for each Friday. So you will likely note a difference in vocabulary and style between the Monday through Thursday portions and the Friday prayers.

Now, without further ado, we invite you to buckle up (you may encounter some turbulence) and get ready for the adventure of a lifetime! It is our hope and prayer that you will be changed forever by what you're about to read. We have certainly been changed forever by having written it!

1

The First Story

GENESIS 1–2

MONDAY: Story

Before there was *something*, there was *Someone*. Go back as far as your mind will allow you to, millions or billions of years . . . go back beyond the creation of the world, before the existence of matter and energy, space and time . . . drive a stake in the nothingness you imagine and an odd thing happens: From behind the mysterious nothingness steps a benevolent Creator to greet you.

This God revealed (but definitely not contained) in the Bible has always existed and will always exist. He exists as a communion of three Persons—infinite, personal, triune, transcendent and immanent all at the same time. It is from this eternal community of oneness that all others derive life, meaning and purpose. It is from this eternal community of oneness that everything that exists is spoken into existence.

From out of the depths of His love, He spoke light into being, separating it from darkness. He created spiral galaxies filled with innumerable stars, related to each other by distances that can only be measured in light years. And out of all the billions of places He could have chosen, He focused His attention on one tiny planet, lavishing upon that blue marble His love and creativity, giving it sun, moon

and stars . . . atmosphere, dry land and water . . . oxygen, cherry trees and grapevines, hammerhead sharks and falcons . . . wild boars and hairy apes and llamas. “So much beauty around us for just two eyes to see,”¹ Rich Mullins used to sing.

And, at last, the pinnacle of God’s creation: humans. Perhaps He created us last as a testament to our inherent dignity—saving the best for last, so to speak. Or perhaps it was so we wouldn’t try to tell Him where to put things.

One thing is pretty clear: He didn’t need our help. It may sound trite and overused, but it’s true nonetheless: God is God and we are not. God created absolutely everything, and into this perfect garden of delight, He placed the man and eventually the woman, giving them dominion over everything else. God was to rule over them, and they were to rule over everything else.

There they lived in unbroken intimacy with God, with each other and with the world around them. It was an idyllic existence.

There was just one rule. Not 10 commandments. Not 613 laws. One rule. They were free to do anything they wanted except this one thing. Obeying the rule would serve as a reminder for them of Who was really in charge. Their Creator, the one who ruled over them, told them to avoid just one thing: *Don’t eat the fruit of this one tree.*

How hard could that be?

TUESDAY: Beliefs

The book of Genesis serves as a window, a lens through which we see our world, our place in the world and the rest of the Bible. We look *through* it; we rarely look *at* it. By the time Genesis was written, lots of history had taken place. Adam. Eve. Creation. The Fall. Murder. Exile. Construction. Destruction. Famines. Floods. Dysfunctional families. Genesis was not written as it happened; it was written at least two millennia after the first domino was knocked over.

Before Genesis was written down, Father Abraham—we’ll read his story soon—and his frustrating walk of faith had come and gone. Isaac had been rescued. Jacob had been lamed. Joseph had been sold. Patterns had been established. The family had become a nation within a nation. For 400 years, the Israelites languished in slavery under the oppressive hand of their Egyptian taskmasters.

Then, suddenly, into the deafening silence, God spoke to a man, and through that man God spoke (first) to His people, (next) to His people’s keepers and (ultimately) to all of human history.

And still Genesis had not been written.

As far as we know, the plagues were visited upon the Egyptians, the Red Sea was parted, the Law was given, the Golden Calf was crafted and the spies were convinced that invading the land of their destiny would be a mistake . . . all of that happened *before* Genesis was written.

Perhaps there is a sense in which it is *because* of these stories—and others like them—that Genesis (and the other historical-narrative parts of the Bible) was written. Genesis is written to remind us of what has happened, what God has done and how He has interacted with His people through the first eras of human history. This reminder demonstrates two vitally important principles:

Scripture is always a means to a greater end.

Scripture corrects, reveals and instructs.

It is intended to make us more like the God who authors it. God does not merely desire a transfer of information; He desires our complete transformation.

It is for these reasons that Moses finally put down in writing the stories that had been handed down from generation to generation. He was less concerned with telling us *how* the world was created than He was in telling us that the world was created and by Whom.

And what a world it is! Intricate design (look at a blade of grass under a microscope), balance (four seasons every year), order (the world keeps turning) and controlled mayhem (kick over an anthill sometime). It is a marvelous place of wonder and beauty. If the creation is this amazing, how amazing must the Creator be?

WEDNESDAY: Values

The beginning of the Bible does more than reveal something about God's character and nature (though that should always be among the first things we look for in Scripture); it also reveals something of God's desire and rights. A creator always has rights to determine what becomes of the creation.

The creation story reveals some things that God values. For example, He values creativity balanced with order and design; He does not create things willy-nilly. There also seems to be a structure to His creation process—but the process is not really a model of efficiency. This God values structure and order, but He seems content to take His time, to linger over things without feeling a need to rush or hurry. It's not that He wastes time, but He's not a slave to the clock.

There is order and structure, but diversity seems to be favored over efficiency in God's economy of creation. The things He creates are far from uniform. There

is no cookie-cutter assembly line producing leaves in heaven, though that would probably speed the process up considerably. Each leaf is unique, individual, different. Each flower, each snowflake, each person appears to be handcrafted by God.

Furthering our theory that God is not primarily interested in efficiency, it appears that God prefers a rhythm of work and rest to a demanding work schedule. A being powerful enough to create something from nothing could certainly have created everything at once. The God of the Bible did not. He measures Himself, creating just enough for one day, not feeling the need to do too much. And then He rests. He doesn't *need* to rest; He isn't tired. He chooses to rest. He values rest as much as He values work.

The way God's creation of humans is described reminds us that humans are special, unique among God's other creations. Only humans bear the image of God, and as such are to be valued above all other forms of creation. We have an inherent dignity that can only be defended from a correct understanding of the first two chapters of the Bible.

We should notice, too, that it is not merely the male gender of the human species that enjoys this privileged place above all creation. Eve was created to be Adam's companion—his partner—not his maid or his servant. Humans, male and female, enjoy equal status from God's perspective.

Perhaps the most interesting thing to notice is that above everything else God values, He seems to prize community. As God creates, He steps back and declares things to be good. But then He notices something that isn't good: Adam is alone. Amid the beauty and diversity of creation, there is no suitable companion for Adam until another human is made. In addition to being a new creation, Eve brings a new creation into the Garden: the creation of community. God doesn't merely want us to be rightly related to Him; He wants us to be rightly related to one another as well. Community is a prominent theme throughout the Bible.

Creativity. Order and design. Diversity. Rest. People. Community. These are the priorities of God's heart as it is revealed in the first two chapters of the Bible. Are they ours as well?

THURSDAY: Actions

The Creator God revealed in the first few pages of Scripture does not merely create a wonderful garden and place two people in it to lounge around forever. He gives them work to do. First, He calls them to be fruitful and multiply (hooray

for sex!). Then He gives them the task of managing the garden. All of creation was under their dominion, just as they were under God's dominion.

Even after many millennia, this idea that humans are stewards of God's creation has never been repealed. We should be custodians of the beauty and diversity of this earth. Those who are in a relationship with their Creator should lead the way in matters of environmental concern. Clearly, we must do this with wisdom and discernment, but do it we must.

In our work, however, we would be wise to follow God's example of resting regularly. In the Ten Commandments given to Moses (more about that presently), God called His people to a weekly period of rest that reflected the pattern He began at creation. We are not obligated to keep the law of the Sabbath any longer, but it is still our goal to manifest an ever-increasing level of godliness in our behavior. One godly thing we can all do is rest, whether we think we need to or not.

Because humans matter so much to our Creator, our fellow humans must also matter to those of us who seek to reflect His glory in our own lives. This may mean fighting for the rights of the unborn and the elderly. But it means much more than that. It means bringing aid to those in need—water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, companionship for the lonely. It means loving our neighbors—those on the other side of the planet, those on the other side of the street and those on the other side of the political spectrum. God not only values human life, He values human community. In our activities, we should not only champion the sanctity of life but the sanctity of fellowship as well.

There are simple things most of us can do to reflect godliness in our behavior. For a starter (and this one is far too often neglected among Christians), married people can have sex. There . . . we stated the obvious! God created sex, and sex is really, really good in the proper context. Enjoy physical intimacy with your spouse as a gift from God. That's godly behavior.

Plant a garden or work in the yard. Physical labor is beneficial for your body, mind and spirit. It gets you in touch with the elemental qualities of life. It reminds you that one of the reasons God put you on this planet was to care for it.

Create a work of art. Paint a picture. Mold some clay. Play a song on the piano. Write a poem. God is the greatest artist in the universe, and you've been created in His image. Do something to reflect God's creative spirit.

Take a nap. God put you on planet Earth and gave you work to do. That work is meaningful, but it is not the end-all-be-all of your existence. God rested. You should rest, too.

Have friends over for dinner. Enjoy their company. Build community with them. Let them know how much you value their friendship. God does not simply want a string of relationships with individuals; He wants a relationship with *a people*—a group that is rightly related to Him and to one another.

Do something for a stranger. Sponsor a child through Compassion International or World Vision. Plan a short-term mission trip. Volunteer in a soup kitchen. Counsel an unwed mother. Adopt a child. Do something out of your comfort zone that shows how much you agree with God that human life and human dignity are worth working to preserve.

While you're having sex, working in the garden, creating a masterpiece, taking a nap, enjoying a great dinnertime conversation or being an activist, remember this: *It's all worship*. The reason you're able to think, speak, walk, draw, plan, rest, breathe and work is because there is a God who created you for a purpose and has called you into partnership with Him to see His kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

If you can't find cause to worship that Creator, you might need to start over with Monday.

FRIDAY: Prayer

Narrative

O Lord my God, You are exalted above all things we can conceive and imagine. Time and space are a part of Your created order—You brought them into being, and You dwell in all times and places. You are the eternal now, the great I am, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. You are present everywhere and You rule all things, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. You spoke, and energy and matter came into being. Your boundless power and wisdom are evident in Your works, and all things derive their being from You. The beauty, radiance and wisdom that abound in Your creation all point beyond themselves to You, their Creator and Sustainer. I ask for the eyes to see Your goodness, beauty and truth as I behold plants, trees, animals, insects, sunrises and sunsets, landscapes and the starry sky.

Orthodoxy

What we could not have learned from the glories and marvels of Your world, You have revealed through Your Word. We know from the heavens and the earth

that You are all-powerful, utterly wise and everywhere present; Your eternal power and divine nature have clearly been revealed. But it was only through Your special revelation in Scripture that we could know that the One who has dominion over all things is also the Lover of our souls. Your Word is a love letter to the people You created to enjoy forever in loving communion with You. May I be a diligent student of Your Word so that it will renew my mind and give me an eternal perspective as I meditate on your timeless truths.

Orthopathy

Your creation is a magnificent unity in diversity, profound in wisdom, awesome in understanding, marvelous in purpose and rich in elegance. You revel in variety, subtlety, intricacy, information and beauty. All things work together in both the physical and spiritual realms. I thank You for creating and calling me to become conformed to the image of Your Son, and I pray for the grace of holy desire to pursue by Your power what You have called me to become in Christ. I thank You for friendships and alliances with likeminded people, and I am grateful for the manifold gifts and ministries in the Body of Christ. Give me a growing heart for Your people so that I will be embedded in others-centered community as a lover and servant of the people You love.

Orthopraxy

You have called me to participate in Your purposes through the work I have been given to do during my earthly sojourn. May I do my work with care and excellence in the desire to be pleasing to You. I realize that all things become spiritual when they are done in Your name. May I honor You in my choices and activities and view the works of my hands as a mode of worship. I want whatever I do in thought, word and deed to be honoring to You and edifying to others. I ask for a clearer sense of purpose and calling and for the power to accomplish that for which You have placed me on this earth.