

## The Whole Bible in 20 Minutes

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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In the beginning there was chaos. Tohu ve'bohu. A formless void. And the Wind of God, uncontained, creative, hovered over it all.

Then, God spoke. A voice said, "let there be light." And there was light.

And God kept speaking. Kept creating and ordering. Separating this from that, giving each thing—every thing—its perfect place in the Creation. And it was all good.

And when it was almost done, God made *you*. Then God said to everything, "rest and delight."

And there you were, in a garden surrounded by everything that you could ever need. Food and sun and shelter and work and even a help-mate. And God was there with you. And all was well.

And God said, "all of this is yours.... except that one tree over there. Don't touch it." But the longing to know and possess what can't be known or possessed got a hold of us. And we ate from the forbidden tree. And that was a breach of trust. When trust is broken, it takes a long time to repair. And we were sent out of the garden to live on our own.

Life outside the garden is hard. It is hard for us to know how to live. A brother kills his own flesh and blood. The blood cries out from the ground. And the question still hangs in the air (from Decatur to Dubai, from Kenya to Kenosha): *am I my brother's keeper?*

We couldn't stop acting selfishly, we couldn't stop hurting each other. We couldn't stop defacing the image of God. And God watched it all and slowly boiled inside.

Finally, God made it rain. And it poured. And the waters rose and they swallowed up every living thing except what was in the boat with Noah. When the water dried, there was a bow in the sky and a promise from God: you are my people and I will take care of you.

God did take care of us, even entering into the lives of individual people. God called to Abraham and Sarah, "go away from the place that you love, to the place I will show you." And they did. And one night, Abraham walked outside and looked up at the stars, and God said, "All of those stars are your children and your children's children." And Sarah laughed.

Those children of Abraham were quite a lot. Isaac, the traumatized one, who never forgave his father for holding the knife over him. Jacob, a thief who wrestled with God. Joseph, the punk kid whom everyone hated who ended up saving his people in the end.

There was Moses. Moses, a baby floating on the water to escape a genocide. Moses, raised in Pharaoh's house. Moses, who killed a man in a righteous rage. Moses, who saw a bush on fire and heard God say, "I hear my people crying out in slavery; Moses, go to pharaoh and bring them out." Moses didn't want to. But he did what I AM said. He led the people out of slavery. The army followed them to the edge of the Sea. And they felt the rumble of the horses and the chariots closing behind them; but God parted the water and the people walked through on dry land and God closed the water on the Egyptian army.

On the other side, in freedom, Miriam danced in joy. But they were only free from the Egyptians. Not from fear, or doubt, or their sin, or the harshness of life in the desert. God gave them water to drink and manna to scrape off the ground and eat, but they grumbled and groused about how much better it was in Egypt. God called Moses up to Sinai and said "my people need clear instructions about how to live together. Here are 10 clear, simple rules." Moses brought them down. And there his family was worshiping a Gold idol. That was almost the end of the story again.

But God let Joshua bring the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey. A land of hope. A land already occupied by people who were not happy to see God's people arrive. And so began a long, difficult process by which God's people had to figure out who they were in the midst of lots of other very different people.

Over the years, God's people managed and survived. Foreign threats would rise and fall. God's people were never secure enough with their life of worship and prayer and kindness and mutual aid. They were always afraid. Of the Philistines. Or the Egyptians. Or the Assyrians. Or the Babylonians. Or the Persians. Finally, they insisted that God give them a king. "If only we have a king, we will not be afraid anymore," they said. God said, "you don't want a king. You don't know what kings do with their power, you are better off without a king." But the people said, "NO! Give us a king." And God said, "OK. You asked for it."

And the people got Saul, who was deposed. And David, the best of them all, a poet and a musician and slayer of giants, but also a liar and an adulterer. Dozens and dozens of kings would follow. And guess what? God was right. Kings abuse people. They hoard the wealth. They abandon God's way. God's people suffer.

God raises up prophets. Prophets come from all walks of life. God gives them insight and wisdom to speak truth to power. And they did and do. They preached and protested and made life miserable for the corrupt kings. Their names were Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Elijah and Elisha, Micah, Amos, and Hosea. And they said "Damn the one who oppresses God's people," and they said, "Let justice roll down like water," and they said, "do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God." But the kings couldn't hear. The armies of the nations around God's people circled tighter and tighter. And the holy city was taken. And the Temple, the house of the Lord, was desecrated. And people wondered if God might have gone away, too.

But in that moment, Isaiah brought a message: "Comfort my people. There is a highway in the desert, and every valley shall be raised up and every mountain made low." And the people returned to their city. And they re-built the walls. And they re-built the Temple. And they tried to re-build their faith. But they never quite found the right king to lead them.

One day, in a small village in the middle of nowhere, a teenage girl heard a voice. "Mary, I have chosen you." The voice said, "you will have a baby." She was afraid, but she said, "let it be." And she sang, "God has done great things for me, God has looked at me with favor; God pulls the mighty down from their thrones and God lifts up the lowly; God fills the hungry with good things while the rich are sent away empty."

This pregnant girl and her husband went to Bethlehem, to the city of David, and she gave birth to her baby in the animal stalls. But the family soon fled the country because the Roman king heard a rumor that a mighty ruler had been born and he started murdering children.

Mary's child grew up. We don't know much, except that his family worked with their hands and lived among the poor. One day, a prophet named John stood in the Jordan River, shouting at people, telling them, "repent! Turn to God!" And he told them to come and be bathed in the river and be made new. And they did. People came to the bug-eater by the thousands. One of them was a construction worker from Nazareth. He went into the river, and when he came up, the sky opened and dove came and a voice said "this one is my beloved."

John knew what it meant. No one else did. Not even the man himself. He fled into the desert, where he was tempted to give everything up, and there he discovered something important about what he was called to do and about who it was that had called him.

He began to talk to people. He talked to poor fishermen who were being squeezed out by commercial fisheries on the sea of Galilee. And he said, "the kingdom of God is at hand." And there was something about him that was believable enough. He said "I have come to proclaim good news to the poor and release to those who are captive." And they believed him. And he said, "Blessed are the poor, and the meek, and the merciful, and the peacemakers—they are God's children," and they believed him. And he said, "love your enemies," and they wanted to. And he said, "leave everything and follow." And they did. He touched people who were sick and they were made well. He fed people who were hungry. He ate meals with sex workers and tax collectors and said, "this is the Reign of God." Some people even say he walked on water.

As they listened and followed, they began to see that a new way of thinking and a new way of being was possible. And they laughed and sang and felt free and had hope.

One Passover, Jesus went to Jerusalem. And he entered the city on a donkey, and huge crowds waved tree branches and shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It was then the leaders knew he would need to die.

Jesus met with his friends on his last night and they did what they had always done—they ate together. But it was different. Jesus washed their feet. And he told them to love one another, as they had been loved. And he told them that he was going away, but that a Spirit would come to them. And Jesus broke bread for them and poured out wine for them and said, “keep doing this and I will be with you when you do.”

That night he was arrested. And beaten. And tried in a sham trial. And the next day he was killed in the most vile way you can kill someone—by nailing him to a cross. And when he was dead, they buried him. And the women who watched wept. And the men who had followed him ran away.

On the third day after he was killed, the women got up early in the morning and took burial spices to his tomb with the hope that they could perhaps do justice to the body. And they got to the tomb, and the stone was pushed back. The tomb was empty. There was no body.

We’re not sure what happened next, exactly. People said that they saw him. Not a dream. Not an illusion. It was really him. He spoke to them and embraced them and ate fish with them. And one of them even insisted on touching the holes where the nails had been.

After a few weeks, he disappeared again.

A group of those who had been with Jesus were together when something just as strange happened. They felt an energy among them. A boldness. A sensitivity to each other. An awareness of human community below the level of difference, beneath the differences of language and culture. The energy made them euphoric. And it changed the course of their lives.

They began to go out and talk to people. Lots of people. Lots of different people. Not just Jews. Gentiles. Women. Slaves. They found themselves in so many unlikely places, in conversations with people they never would have talked to before. They said the Spirit sent them.

And before long, there were small communities of Jesus followers popping up all over. In Thessalonica and Philippi. And Corinth. And Rome. And all of them were different. And they couldn’t agree—they could never agree—on exactly what it is that a follower of the Way is supposed to think or how they are supposed to act.

But they baptized new members in the name of God, Christ, and Spirit. And they broke bread and poured the cup together. And they shared their things with each other. And they loved one another with a fierce and tender love, just as they had been loved, they loved each other.

For many years, the Romans were wary of this “alternative Kingdom” and its crucified and Risen King. And the followers of Jesus wondered, will the Way ever win? Will peace ever reign? Will love ever defeat the powers and the principalities that assemble against it? One man, sitting in a Roman prison, dreamed of such a day. The day is coming, he said, when love will win. And on

that day, every tear will be wiped away, and mourning and pain will be no more. For God will come and make God's home with us. God will dwell with us. And all will be well again.

We've always wanted to know when that day will come. Some have said, "it will never come." Some say, "it's coming, we just have to wait." And some say, "what if it's already here?"

What do you think? It is, after all, your story.