

ASKING

THE

RIGHT

QUESTIONS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

UNDERSTANDING AND

APPLYING THE BIBLE



MATTHEW S. HARMON



"I love Matthew Harmon's book *Asking the Right Questions*. That's probably because Matt loves the Bible (and so do I). He has found a beautiful balance between Bible study skills and devotional depth. And he links all his insights to the gospel."

Randy Newman, senior teaching fellow, C. S. Lewis Institute; author, *Questioning Evangelism* and *Corner Conversations*

"I love this book on how to study and apply the Bible. Some books on interpreting Scripture are so complicated and have so many steps that we can become discouraged, but Harmon is simple and clear without being simplistic. He helps us see the big picture in studying the Bible by reminding us of the storyline of Scripture and by emphasizing that the story centers on Jesus himself. At the same time, we are given very practical advice on how to study and apply specific passages. An excellent resource for teachers, students, and all who desire to study the Scriptures."

Thomas R. Schreiner, professor of New Testament, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"The guidance Harmon provides in *Asking the Right Questions* is simple enough for a teenager or new believer to follow, but deep enough to lead even mature Christians to a better grasp and deeper application of Scripture. I love this book and look forward to using it to disciple people in our church."

Brian G. Hedges, lead pastor, Fulkerson Park Baptist Church, Niles, Michigan; author, *Christ Formed in You*

"Asking good questions is a key to understanding. And asking good questions about the Bible is a key to understanding the most important truths in the world. God can handle all your questions, and he loves to reward those who ask in faith when engaging his very words. This book will help you ask the best of questions on the best of sources—God's Word—in the best of ways—by faith."

David Mathis, executive editor, desiring God.org; pastor, Cities Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace:* Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible

MATTHEW S. HARMON



Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible

Copyright © 2017 by Matthew S. Harmon

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2017

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from *The New American Standard Bible*®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5429-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5432-2 PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5430-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5431-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harmon, Matthew S., author.

Title: Asking the right questions: a practical guide to understanding and applying the Bible / Matthew S. Harmon.

Description: Wheaton: Crossway, 2017. I Includes bibliographical references and index. Identifiers: LCCN 2016045619 (print) I LCCN 2017013276 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433554308 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433554308 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433554309 (pdf) | ISBN 978143354309 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433554309 (pdf) | ISBN 978143554309 (pdf) | ISBN 978143554309

ISBN 9781433554315 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433554322 (epub) | ISBN 9781433554292 (tp) Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BS511.3 (ebook) | LCC BS511.3 .H375 2017 (print) | DDC 220.601—dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016045619

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Contents

Ack	nowledgments11
Intr	oduction
PAR	T. I
	ING THE FOUNDATION
1	The Story We Find Ourselves In19
2	The Bible Is God's Tool to Change Us
PAR RF	T 2 Ading the bible
3	Reading the Bible as Jesus Did45
4	Written for Us but Not to Us55
5	Four Foundational Questions
PAR	Т 3
RE	ADING OUR LIVES
6	The Gospel Pattern of Life77
7	The Fallen Condition85
8	The Gospel Solution93
9	Applying the Bible to Our Whole Lives
10	The Power to Obey

Conclusion
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Resource 1: Tips for Understanding and Applying Different Kinds of Passages
Resource 2: A Word to Pastors, Sunday School Teachers, and Small Group Leaders
Resource 3: At a Glance: Asking the Right Questions 131
General Index
Scripture Index

Acknowledgments

The Bible is the most remarkable book in the world. The moment God saved me, he gave me a love for his Word. From that point forward, he also brought a number of people into my life who helped me understand and apply the Bible. In high school and college, I had men like Don Willeman, Mike Thacker, and Brian McCollister who discipled me with open Bible in hand. They showed me the beauty of Christ and what it meant to follow him by constantly taking me to Scripture and living out the truths of the Bible right before my eyes.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to several professors who have shaped the way I read the Bible. While studying at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Wheaton College, I had the privilege of studying under scholars such as D. A. Carson, Doug Moo, and Greg Beale. Each of them has shaped my study of the Bible in significant ways.

While I was doing my graduate work, I also had multiple opportunities to teach Cru staff how to interpret and communicate the Bible in their various ministries. I taught along-side godly men such as Keith Johnson, Gary Purdy, Rick Hove, Jonathan Pennington, Darian Lockett, and many others. Readers who have gone through those Cru classes will see its finger-prints throughout this book.

12 Acknowledgments

As a professor at Grace College and Theological Seminary, I have the privilege of teaching students how to understand and apply the Bible. Much of the material in this book has been used and refined through my interaction with them. The same is true of the many opportunities I have had to teach and preach at Christ's Covenant Church. Seeing God's people grow in their understanding of God's Word and watching them apply it to their lives brings me unspeakable joy.

I also want to express my gratitude to several people who read all or part of this book and gave helpful feedback. Special thanks go to Zac Hess, John Sloat, Gabe Tribbett, and Brian Hedges. Through their thoughtful input they have made this a better book.

Working with the people at Crossway has been a delight. I appreciate their enthusiasm for this project and their help along the way. I owe special thanks to Justin Taylor for his friendship and his encouragement.

Without the love and support of my wife, Kate, and my sons, Jon and Jake, this book would never have been written. They have consistently embraced God's call on my life to help people see the beauty of Jesus Christ and follow him. It is my prayer that God will use this book to make that happen in your life.

Introduction

Her excitement was contagious. Mallika had been a Christian for only a few months, but already her life was beginning to change. She had a newfound joy and peace that transcended her circumstances. If the doors of her local church were open, she was likely there. She loved to sing the hymns and worship songs she was learning. Throughout the day she found herself spontaneously praying about situations and people. She was even beginning to talk to her coworkers and neighbors about Jesus. Since she had grown up in a non-Christian home, everything about her relationship with Jesus Christ was new.

There was just one problem—she had no idea how to understand the Bible and apply it to her life. The woman who led her to Christ emphasized the importance of being in the Word on a regular basis, but had not given Mallika any help or training in how to do this. Every Sunday her pastor faithfully preached the Bible and encouraged the congregation to study Scripture on their own, but just the thought of it completely overwhelmed Mallika. Every time she tried to read her Bible, she just became more discouraged.

Laura has been a believer since she was eight years old. Her parents regularly read the Bible with her and encouraged her involvement in the church's youth ministry. When it came time to choose a college, Laura opted for a small Christian liberal arts college where she knew she would have lots of opportunities to grow in her faith. From her first day on campus Laura was involved in several different ministries at school and her local church.

Despite her constant involvement in ministry, however, Laura struggled to maintain consistent time in God's Word on her own. She enjoyed hearing the messages in chapel and the sermons from the pastor at her church. At times she even attended a Sunday school class. But when she sat down to read and apply the Bible herself, she regularly walked away frustrated. Laura even took an elective class on how to study the Bible, but the method her professor taught was so complicated that she never had the time for it.

After several years of being a member at his church, Tobe was asked to lead a small group. He had come to faith in Christ in his early thirties and has been involved in the church for the past fifteen years. While he is no Bible scholar, Tobe spends time reading the Bible nearly every day. On occasion he even reads Christian books that deepen his understanding of the Bible and how to live the Christian life.

Each week when his small group meets to talk about that week's sermon and the passage on which it is based, however, Tobe often walks away disappointed or even frustrated. Too often their discussions wander down rabbit trails that have little or nothing to do with what the passage says. Or the conversation stays on the surface level and never gets around to how the truths of that passage should change our lives.

• • •

Maybe you can identify with Mallika, Laura, or Tobe because you have had a similar experience. But even if your experience is different, all of us at some point have struggled to know how to understand and apply the Bible to our everyday lives. We believe that understanding and applying the Bible is crucial to following Jesus, but we don't always feel equipped to do it well.

Why is something so important to the Christian life so hard sometimes? For one thing, the Bible is a big book that talks about a lot of different things. How do you figure out the most important things to look for when reading it?

To read any book well you need to know what kind of book it is. So what kind of book is the Bible? Why did God give it to us? Does the Bible give us any help in knowing how to read it?

Another reason understanding and applying the Bible can be challenging is that the Bible is set in a world very different from today. Some of the stories and people it describes seem very strange or even upsetting to our modern sensibilities. How do we take what it says and apply it to our lives today? There has to be a simple and practical way to understand and apply the Bible that anyone can use.

This book is my attempt to help you. The main tool we will learn to use is a set of questions (that's the reason for the title!). The questions we ask when we read the Bible largely determine how we understand and apply it. So if we want to understand and apply the Bible, we need to make sure we are asking the right questions.

But how do we know which are the right questions to ask? Grasping what kind of book the Bible is, who and what it is about, and why God gave it to us is essential. That foundation sets us up to know what questions we should ask to understand the Bible.

If our goal is not just to understand but also to apply the Bible, then we also need to learn to read our lives the right way. As followers of Christ, we need to understand the basic pattern of the Christian life—turning away from sin (repentance) and trusting in who God is and what he has done for us (faith). From that starting point, we can then ask the key questions that enable us to apply the Bible to our lives.

That may seem like a lot of ground to cover in a short book. But by the end of this book you will be armed with four simple questions to help you understand the most important insights from any passage. You will also be armed with four simple questions to help you understand how to apply God's Word to your life so you can grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ. After all, as followers of Christ we should desire nothing more than to grow in our love for Christ and our obedience to him.

In fact, why not take a moment right now to pray that God will use this book to help you grow closer to him?

Ready? Let's get started with an overview of who and what the Bible is all about.

PART I

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

The Story We Find Ourselves In

Everyone loves a good story. Whether it is kids begging for Dad to read them a book at bedtime or friends gathering to watch a movie, people enjoy hearing (and telling) stories. Think for a minute about the last time you caught up with an old friend you had not seen in a while. No doubt that conversation included a story or two.

But stories are for more than entertainment or providing information. They shape our understanding of who we are, why we exist, what kind of person we should be, and what kind of world we live in. Whether we realize it or not, we automatically connect everything we experience to what we believe to be the true story of the world. Our view of the world is inherently story shaped.

The Bible tells us the true story of the world, the way things truly are and should be. But because we are sinful, we are blind to this reality. Left to ourselves, we will default to understanding our lives within the false stories promoted by our culture or our own self-made stories. But when we are born again, the Spirit of God opens our hearts and minds to understand what the Bible says about God, us, and the world around us. So if we are going to rightly understand who we are, why we exist, what kind of people we should be, and what kind of world we live in, the starting place is understanding the story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Now that can sound intimidating; after all, the Bible is a huge book! So in what follows I want to give you a brief overview of the story of the Bible. To help you remember the big picture, I have divided the story into six segments, each one beginning with the letter c: creation, crisis, covenants, Christ, church, and consummation.

Creation

The opening sentence of the Bible sets the stage for understanding the nature of the world around us: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). As the Creator, God has complete authority over all that exists. He has created the world to reflect his wisdom and beauty. Out of all that God has made, his masterpiece is humanity. Only human beings are said to be made in God's image. To make sure we don't miss this crucial point, the text says it four times in just two verses (Gen. 1:26–27)! God has created us as image bearers to reflect his character. We are made to be mirrors of his beauty and glory. What people think, believe, desire, and do should display who God is as we interact with him, each other, and creation.

As image bearers our first parents, Adam and Eve, are given a mission. God commands them to rule over creation under his authority, in essence making them kings (Gen. 1:28). God places them in the garden of Eden, which is his sanctuary on earth. They are to serve as priests in this sanctuary, maintaining its purity (Gen. 2:15–17). Through humanity God intends to mediate his presence to the world.

God has not designed us to live as isolated beings. He made us to experience community with each other. This is seen most clearly in the marriage relationship, where a man and a woman become one flesh (Gen. 2:18–25). But even aside from the marriage relationship, God has designed human beings to display his perfections more fully together than any one individual possibly could.

Crisis

The peaceful picture of Genesis 1–2 does not last long. God warned Adam and Eve that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Gen. 2:15–17). But Satan, masquerading as a serpent, convinces Adam and Eve to rebel against God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:1–6). Instead of "being like God" as Satan promised, Adam and Eve experience the shame and guilt of disobeying their Creator (Gen. 3:7). Instead of harmony with God and each other, guilt and shame enter in. Instead of running to God, they try to hide from him (Gen. 3:8).

When God confronts them, he announces judgment. The Serpent is cursed to crawl and eat dust. But more importantly, God makes this promise to the Serpent (in the presence of Adam and Eve):

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

In effect God is saying to the Serpent, "You may have defeated Adam and Eve, but there will come a day when a descendant of Eve will deal you a fatal blow. Yes, you will inflict a wound upon him, but in the end you will be crushed under his feet. My Serpent-crusher will ensure that I accomplish everything I have planned."

For Adam and Eve, judgment falls swiftly as well: increased pain in childbirth for the woman, as well a desire to undermine her husband's leadership in the marriage; increased difficulty in work for the man. Even creation itself is affected, as God places it under a curse. And when the time to die comes, human beings will return to the dust from which they were made.

Speaking of death, why don't Adam and Eve die immediately? Actually, they do—just not in the way we might expect. The ultimate kind of death is spiritual in nature; it is the kind of death that is the result of sin breaking a person's relationship with God. In the moment Adam and Eve rebel against God, they die spiritually. The physical death that follows hundreds of years later is simply the final outworking of their sin.

But judgment is not the final word for Adam and Eve. Although God has every right to end the whole program right there and destroy Adam and Eve for their rebellion, instead he shows mercy. God sacrifices some animals and uses their skins to clothe the man and the woman, which is symbolic of covering their sin (Gen. 3:21). But the damage to creation has been done. Their sin has opened the floodgates for death to ravage creation, leaving it a pale reflection of its original glory.

From that point forward, sin and death spread through creation like wildfire. Things eventually become so bad that God brings judgment in a massive flood that wipes out the entire human race, except Noah and his family (Genesis 6–9). But even though God scrubs the earth clean, the flood does not change the human heart or its inclination toward sin and evil. Not long after Noah and his family emerge from the ark,

they too show themselves to be just like Adam by disobeying God's purpose to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1). This rebellion culminates in the building of the Tower of Babel, where mankind unites to make a name for itself. God brings judgment and scatters the people into different languages (Gen. 11:1-9).

At this point things look grim, but God is just getting started.

Covenants

To bring the Serpent-crusher into the world, God makes a series of covenants. A covenant is a solemn commitment that God makes with a specific person or group of people to do and/or be something. As part of that commitment, God makes promises and places himself under an oath to fulfill them.

While there are hints of a covenant with Adam and a covenant that God makes with Noah (Gen. 6:18; 9:16-17), our starting point is with Abram (later renamed Abraham) and his barren wife Sarai (later renamed Sarah). Seemingly out of nowhere, God makes a stunning promise to them:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:1-3)

Here God is revealing how he is going to bring about the promised Serpent-crusher. He will form Abraham into a great nation and bless all the nations of the earth through him. Through Abraham's line God will fulfill his plan of ruling over creation through humanity. Eventually Sarah gives birth to Isaac as the promised son through whom God will continue the line of promise (Gen. 17:15–21; 21:1–7). God then renews the promise with Isaac's son Jacob (renamed Israel), and eventually with his twelve sons, from whom come the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 26–50).

Hundreds of years later Abraham's descendants have multiplied exponentially but find themselves enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 1). In response to their prayers for deliverance, God raises up Moses to deliver his people from Egypt (Exodus 2–6). Through Moses and his brother, Aaron, God brings a series of plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7–12), culminating in the death of the firstborn (marked by the celebration of Passover). Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and to the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 13–19). When they arrive there, God meets with them. He instructs Moses to say to the people:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:4–6)

God is forming the descendants of Abraham into a nation. By describing them as a "kingdom of priests" God is assigning to Israel a modified version of the commission given to Adam and Eve. Whereas Adam and Eve were designated as priest-kings who ruled over creation from the garden of Eden, Israel is designated a kingdom of priests who will bless the nations from the land of Canaan. This covenant that God is making with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai is the temporary means by which God will preserve the line of the promised Serpent-

crusher and set his people apart from the other nations. As part of this covenant God gives Israel the law to teach them how to live as a kingdom of priests (Exodus 20–31).

But just like Adam and Eve, Israel blows it. Big time. Less than forty days after God spoke to Israel from Mount Sinai, Israel worships a golden calf (Exodus 32-34). Although God forgives them, this is but the first of many times when Israel goes after other gods. After wandering in the wilderness forty years (Numbers 13-36), they finally enter the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, Moses's successor (Joshua 1).

During the lifetime of Joshua, Israel manages to gain control of much of Canaan (Joshua 2-24). But pockets of resistance remain, and in the hundreds of years that follow, these surrounding peoples periodically oppress Israel (Judges 1–16). Such oppression is God's judgment for Israel's idolatry. When Israel cries out for deliverance, God raises up judges to rescue his people. This cycle repeats itself over and over again. Something has to change.

When Israel has finally had enough, the people ask God for a king (1 Samuel 8). They want to be just like the other nations. But that's just it—Israel is not supposed to be just like all the other nations! They are supposed to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation set apart by God to display his character to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, God gives them a king. But he gives them the kind of king the nations have—a man named Saul who is tall, strong, handsome, and wealthy (1 Samuel 9-15). But he is not fully devoted to the Lord, and God eventually rejects Saul as his king.

In his place God anoints David (1 Sam. 16:1–13). As a man after God's heart, David becomes the standard by which every other king will be judged. Eventually God makes a stunning promise to David:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:12–16)

David is promised a descendant who will rule over an eternal kingdom and build a sanctuary for God to dwell with his people. God is making it clear that he is still pursuing his mission of ruling over creation through humanity for the display of his own glory. This promise finds initial and partial fulfillment in David's son Solomon, who extends his kingdom beyond the borders of Israel and builds a temple for the Lord to dwell in (1 Kings 1–10). But just as all before him, Solomon fails (1 Kings 11). He pursues the gods of his foreign wives. The nation begins to spiral downward, splitting into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms (1 Kings 12). It becomes so bad that God first sends Israel (2 Kings 17) and then Judah (2 Kings 25) into exile.

As the kingdoms of Israel and Judah continue their downward spiral into further idolatry, God raises up prophets to announce not only pending judgment but also the hope of restoration. Prophets such as Amos and Hosea announce the coming day of the Lord, when God will bring judgment on both his enemies and his rebellious people, but also redemption for the faithful remnant of his people. They foresee a day when a new

people of God, consisting not merely of Jews but of Gentiles as well, will live under the rule of a Davidic King. God will transform not only his people but creation itself so that he may dwell with them forever.

Later prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel build on the prophecies of Amos and Hosea by announcing God's promise of a new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34)

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26-27)

God will write his law directly on the hearts of his people. Full and final forgiveness will come. Cleansing from impurity and idolatry will be a reality. He will give his people a new heart and a new spirit to obey him. The Spirit of God will dwell in all of his people to empower their obedience. When this new covenant is established, there will be a people of God marked by a personal knowledge of the Lord based on final forgiveness of sins and expressed in greater heart-level obedience.

All of this will be accomplished through the One who is the Serpent-crusher, the Prophet greater than Moses, the Priest greater than Aaron, the conqueror greater than Joshua, David's greater son, the King wiser than Solomon, the servant of the Lord. He will obey where Adam, Noah, Israel, David, Solomon, and all the rest of humanity have failed. He will bring a new Spirit-empowered and Spirit-indwelt people of God into existence to live under his rule and authority in a new heaven and new earth. God will accomplish his purpose of ruling over creation through humanity.

But as the Old Testament closes, the question is When will the promised one come?

Christ

The New Testament begins by clearly identifying Jesus as the promised Serpent-crusher. He is the promised descendant of Abraham through whom God will bless all the nations (Matt. 1:1). He is the Son of David who will rule over an eternal kingdom. Unlike Adam, who failed in the garden, and Israel, who failed in the wilderness, Jesus defeats the Devil in the wilderness by refusing to give in to his temptations (Luke 4:1–13). He is the Spirit-anointed King who announces that the kingdom of God has arrived. Jesus calls for people to turn away from their sins and trust in him to be right with God (Mark 1:14–15).

To validate his message, Jesus begins performing miracles: healing the sick, casting out demons, calming a storm, feeding thousands of people with almost no food, and even raising people from the dead. Out of his growing number of followers, Jesus selects twelve men as apostles to be with him and to preach his message of the kingdom (Mark 3:13–19).

But as Jesus's popularity grows, so does opposition to him. The religious leaders begin to plot how to eliminate the threat that Jesus poses to their way of life. Meanwhile Jesus begins to tell his followers that he must suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders but that three days later he will rise from the dead (Mark 8:31). Despite these clear predictions, the disciples simply cannot wrap their minds around the idea of a suffering Messiah.

Everything comes to a head when Jesus visits Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. While there, he is arrested, beaten, and sentenced to be crucified as a political revolutionary (Mark 14–15). But what the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities mean for evil, God means for good. Not only does Jesus live a life of perfect obedience to God; he also willingly lays down his life as a sacrifice for sin. Through his death on the cross Jesus pays the penalty we deserve for our sinful rebellion against God.

The story doesn't end with Jesus's death, however. Three days later he rises from the dead, defeating sin, death, and the Devil himself (Luke 24). Jesus's resurrection shows definitively that God has begun to make all things new. The curse that fell upon creation when Adam rebelled is now being reversed! But it is not yet time for God to complete his plans of a new heaven and new earth. So Jesus spends forty days teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God and preparing them for their coming mission (Acts 1:1–11). But they must wait in Jerusalem until God sends the Holy Spirit to empower them for that mission. Jesus then ascends into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the day when he will return for his people.

Church

Less than two weeks later—on the day of Pentecost—it happens: God pours out the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Acts 2:1–41). Peter preaches the good news about Jesus to the thousands of Jews gathered in Jerusalem from all across the Mediterranean world. In response three thousand people turn from their sin, trust in Jesus to have their sins forgiven, and are baptized. These new followers of Jesus form a new community, sharing a common life that shows they are the true people of God.

From these humble origins the church starts to spread. Beginning in Jerusalem the gospel expands throughout the Mediterranean world, led especially by the efforts of the apostle Paul (Acts 3–28). Through their self-sacrificial love and bold witness for Jesus, fledgling communities of faith become outposts of God's kingdom invading this fallen world.

And this is where we as the church find ourselves today. Jesus dwells in his people through the Holy Spirit to transform us and spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. We are called to make disciples by sharing the good news of what Jesus has done and teaching people to obey what he has commanded (Matt. 28:18–20). Because we are joined to Christ by faith, we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession," called to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

We live out this mission as "sojourners and exiles" in this world, called to live in a way that will cause even unbelievers to glorify God (1 Pet. 2:11–12). We pursue lives of purity and holiness in anticipation of Christ's return (1 John 3:1–3). Even in the midst of our suffering, the Spirit empowers us to set our hope on the day when God will transform all creation for his glory and our good (Rom. 8:19–25).

Consummation

When the time finally comes for God to consummate all that he has promised, it will take our breath away. Christ will return in glory. God will usher in a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell with his people:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3–4)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:1–5)

Transformed creation. God dwelling with his people. The curse lifted. Sins forgiven. God's people serving him and worshiping him unhindered. God's glory filling the earth. Redeemed humanity reigning over creation forever and ever. This is our destiny as followers of Iesus.

That, in a nutshell, is the true story of the world. This reality should transform the way we think, what we desire, and what we do. It should shape how we relate to God and how we relate to others. Every aspect of our lives, including how we read and apply the Bible, must be governed by this grand story stretching from Genesis to Revelation.

But a story this grand, this sweeping, this all-encompassing, can seem so big that it overwhelms us. We can find ourselves asking how this story affects our lives, what our role in the true story of the world is, and how the Bible fits into this picture. So that is what we need to explore in our next chapter.

SIMPLE OUESTIONS TO ASK EVERY TIME YOU OPEN YOUR BIBLE

We all know that we should read our Bibles—yet at times we struggle with knowing exactly how, no matter how long we've followed Jesus. In this empowering book, Professor Matthew Harmon walks us through two simple sets of questions to ask every time we open our Bibles:

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

- 1. What do we learn about God?
- 2. What do we learn about people?
- 3. What do we learn about relating to God?
- 4. What do we learn about relating to others?

APPLYING THE BIBLE

- 1. What does God want me to understand?
- 2. What does God want me to believe?
- 3. What does God want me to desire?
- 4. What does God want me to do?

Arming you with practical ways to get to the heart of any passage, this book will help position you to experience the joy that results from being transformed by God's Word.

"Harmon helps us see the big picture in studying the Bible. An excellent resource for teachers, students, and all who desire to study the Scriptures."

 $\textbf{THOMAS R. SCHREINER}, \ \operatorname{professor} \ \operatorname{of} \ \operatorname{New} \ \operatorname{Testament}, \ \operatorname{The Southern} \ \operatorname{Baptist} \ \operatorname{Theological} \ \operatorname{Seminary}$

"Harmon has found a beautiful balance between Bible study skills and devotional depth. And he links all his insights to the gospel."

RANDY NEWMAN, senior teaching fellow, C. S. Lewis Institute; author, Questioning Evangelism

"This book is simple enough for a new believer to follow, but deep enough to lead even mature Christians to a better grasp of Scripture. I love it and look forward to using it to disciple people in our church."

BRIAN G. HEDGES, lead pastor, Fulkerson Park Baptist Church; author, Christ Formed in You

MATTHEW S. HARMON (PhD, Wheaton College) is professor of New Testament studies at Grace College and Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana. He has written several books, including commentaries on Philippians, 2 Peter, and Jude. He also serves on the preaching team of Christ's Covenant Church, where he leads a small group and teaches the Bible regularly.

CHRISTIAN LIVING / INTERPRETATION

