

# THE 30-MINUTE BIBLE



**GOD'S STORY FOR EVERYONE**

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW AND PAIGE P. VANOSKY



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# PREFACE



ONE MIGHT WONDER how two very different people from two different continents came together to write this book—Craig, a noted biblical scholar based in Cambridge, UK, and me (Paige), a less well-known Bible teacher living in San Diego.

It began with a question: “Thirty minutes? Can I really summarize the entire Bible in just thirty minutes?” I wasn’t sure I knew the answer, but I had just joined a book club and needed to review a book—but what book? Truth be told, I had joined the group in part because I wanted to hear about the books I did not have time to read. I have always loved reading, but for some years I had found myself without time to do much of that type of reading. So I sent out a call for suggestions.

I was shocked when a few people suggested I review the Bible. Granted, for many years I had been leading a chronological overview of the Bible to a rather ecumenical group of women—Catholic, Protestant, skeptic, strong believers, and Jewish Christians. The discussion from this mixed group made for great insight into differing views and for much personal reflection. I could see this background would be

helpful for speaking to a larger group of women with beliefs unknown to me. But could I possibly explain the story of the Bible in just thirty minutes? So with the valuable assistance of my Bible study group, I put together a thirty-minute talk. And as friends began asking for copies, the idea of *The 30-Minute Bible* was born.

One slight problem was in the way—I had never been to seminary, and I was not at all comfortable releasing such an important book without scholarly assistance. It would be years before I discovered Craig Bartholomew. Craig is a highly regarded biblical scholar and the author of numerous scholarly books covering a wide range of topics. He is deeply interested in opening the story of the Bible up to the layperson. His unique scholarly insight and intriguing perspective on the story found within the Bible are immensely valuable to understanding this otherwise complex story. It has been a privilege to work with him as together we have sought to distill the long and meandering story of the Bible into one we hope you will find easily read and understood.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

How *You* Can Read and Understand the Bible



**T**HE BIBLE REMAINS the bestselling book of all time. You may well have one hidden away somewhere in your house yourself. But while the Bible continues to sell incredibly well, it is often not read.

In many cases, this is not for lack of trying. Begin at the beginning—which sounds perfectly logical—and you may soon become bogged down in the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, the second and third books of the Bible, wondering what on earth they have to do with your life today. And so the Bible returns to its shelf, leaving you discouraged and feeling like you could never understand this strange book, as much as you would like to.

Why then read the Bible? To some the Bible is the basis for the largest religion in the world, Christianity, while for others it has been

so influential historically that we need to be aware of it as literature if we are to understand our history. Still others seek to understand God and his relationship to the world. They wonder if God could possibly know or care about what is happening on earth and in our lives. To still others it is the book they meditate on to be instructed by and addressed by God, who has revealed himself particularly in Jesus Christ.

There are many good reasons for reading the Bible, and whatever your reason, the crucial question is *how* to go about reading it so that you can understand it. For many people, the experience of reading the Bible is like trying to force a big, bolted door open, and the million-dollar question is whether there's any key that can unlock the door and enable ordinary people like us to read and understand it.

The really good news of this book is that there is indeed such a key! We have found this key to work through years of teaching the Bible in home, church, and university settings. We have experienced again and again that this key really works. What, then, is this key?



Craig has a terrible sense of direction and can easily get lost. Thus, he is constantly grateful for GPS, with a voice telling him where to turn, which exit to take on the many roundabouts, etc., as he drives between his home in the town of March and Cambridge, UK, where he works. For navigating unknown roads, GPS is indispensable. But imagine if he is planning a lecture tour in America, a tour that includes speaking in several major cities. What would he need to plan his trip? The best tool to get him started is not GPS but a large-scale map so that he can connect the dots between all the different places

he needs to visit. Then he can see how his tour fits together as a whole. Only after that can he attend to the details.

OLD TESTAMENT		NEW TESTAMENT	
<b>THE PENTATEUCH</b>	<b>THE PROPHETS</b>	<b>THE GOSPELS</b>	<b>THE LETTERS</b>
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	<i>Major Prophets</i> Isaiah Jeremiah (Lamentations) Ezekiel Daniel	(The Life of Christ) Matthew Mark Luke John	<i>From Paul</i> Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon
<b>THE HISTORY</b>	<i>Minor Prophets</i> Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah	<b>ACTS</b> (The Activities of the Apostles)	<i>From Others</i> Hebrews James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude
<b>POETRY &amp; WISDOM</b>	Haggai Zechariah Malachi		<b>REVELATION</b> (A book of apocalyptic writing)
Joshua Judges Ruth 1 & 2 Samuel 1 & 2 Kings 1 & 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon		

**Figure 1.1.** The books and collections of the Bible

The same is true with the Bible. No matter how enthusiastic you may be to get into the Bible, it's easy to get lost in the myriad details. For example, look at the contents page of any Bible—we suggest you use one in a modern translation<sup>1</sup>—or look through the contents page above and you will see straightaway that the Bible consists not of one book but of dozens of books! And, as you will see from the contents page, there are two major parts to the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament, which is like the distinction between the southern and the northern hemispheres on a map of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Right away we see from this table of contents that the Bible is broken into two parts—the Old and New Testaments, delineating the time before Christ and after Christ, respectively. The books in each of these two testaments take us on a chronological journey through time, from the creation of the world as told in Genesis to the prophesied end as told in Revelation. As if this were not confusing enough, browse through the headings of sections and you may come across strange words like “The Pentateuch,” “Gospels,” “Acts,” and “Revelation,” and you will also notice soon enough that there are different types of literature in the Bible: history, poetry, wisdom (what is “wisdom?”), and, in the New Testament, many letters (or “epistles”).

As helpful as the headings are in the Bible’s table of contents, they add confusion for a new reader and certainly do not provide us with the sort of large-scale map we need to understand the Bible. In our experience, even when familiar with a good number of Bible stories, many people don’t know how they fit together. Imagine having pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without the picture to guide you as you assemble them! Likewise, we need a big picture or a large-scale map to guide our reading of the Bible so that we can see how the pieces fit together.

Now, crucially, if a map of America is to help Craig plan his tour, it has to be accurate. It must fit with what is on the ground. And so it is with a large-scale map of the Bible; it must fit with the nature of the Bible. And what is the nature of the Bible? The overarching shape of the Bible is that of a grand, sprawling story. That’s right: *story*. This gets us close to the key that unlocks the Bible.

We humans resonate deeply with stories. If you want to get to know someone, sooner or later you find yourself saying, “Tell me about

yourself!”—or, in other words, “Tell me your story.” “Where were you born, what school did you go to, what is your family like, what do you do, etc., etc.?” To a greater extent than we may realize, we make sense of our own lives and enter into the lives of others through stories.

The key to understanding the Bible is to see that *it tells a story of the whole world*, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the wrapping up of history. Its plot unfolds between these two bookends with Jesus at the heart of it all. Getting to know the story of the Bible enables us to read it while seeing how the many pieces fit into an overarching whole.

We probably all know that Jesus is central to the Bible. We can easily miss, however, that to understand Jesus, who we learn about mainly in the New Testament, we need to go all the way back to Adam and Eve and then trace the story forward to see how Jesus fits into it and fulfills it. The story of the Bible is the large-scale map that enables us to see how it all fits together.

The good news is that this small book is designed precisely to provide you with just such a large-scale map and with other cultural and historical information that will deepen your understanding of the Bible’s story. This overview can help you read the Bible with understanding and an awareness of how individual parts fit into the big picture. Paige has been teaching the content of this book to Christians and non-Christians for twelve years, and the result has been transformative. The same can happen to you.

*The 30-Minute Bible* leads you through the major landmarks of the storyline of the Bible. We want to take you on the journey from the beginning of the world to its end, with the amazing story in between. The book is arranged in bite-sized chunks so that if you set aside thirty minutes each day for thirty days, you’ll become familiar with the entire

story. At each stage we suggest readings from the Bible—as you read them, we think you’ll find that yes, you *can* understand the Bible. Do get hold of a Bible in modern English. Many are available. For example, in this book when we quote from the Bible, we are using the New International Version (NIV), a very accessible version.

The Bible is a bottomless well that we can continue to study—and gain fresh insights from—our whole life long. At the same time, its overarching story can be grasped quickly. Indeed, a good test of this book having achieved its goal is that by the end, you should be able to tell the story of the Bible in about thirty minutes.

We’re aware that you cannot engage with the Bible without having questions, just like the Bible study group Paige has been teaching for twelve years. These are important! We encourage you to keep a list of your questions and to seek answers to them, whether individually or in a group.

The British writer Margaret Silf tells the story of a luncheon at which each guest had brought a dish to share. She noted with sadness that a lovely rice salad was left untouched. And then she saw why this was the case: no spoon had been provided! A great feast awaits in the Bible, and we hope that this book will provide you with a spoon so that you can start eating!

Even as you plunge into the extraordinary story of the Bible, we want to provide you with two overarching frameworks that will be a great help to you as you navigate the sprawling story of the Bible. The Bible is a story, but it is a sprawling, detailed one with many, many smaller stories, plots, and twists and turns.

The first framework is this: imagine the whole biblical story as a *drama in six acts*.<sup>3</sup> As we tell the story, we will situate the different parts within these six acts:

\* Act One. God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation

The story of the Bible begins with God as the great King creating everything from nothing and pronouncing it “very good” (chapters two and three).

\* Act Two. Rebellion in the Kingdom: The Fall

Answers the question “What is wrong with our world?” It diagnoses our condition in relation to the rebellion of the first couple, Adam and Eve, and our own rebellion against God (chapter four).

\* Act Three. The King Chooses Israel: Salvation Initiated

Is all about God’s response to our rebellion. God chooses and forms a people, Israel, and lives among them. Israel is intended to live under God’s reign and to show to the world what life is meant to be (chapters five through nineteen).

\* Act Four. The Coming of the King: Salvation Accomplished

God’s life with Israel climaxes in the coming of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Jesus lives the perfect life, dies by crucifixion, and then is raised from the dead. He ascends to the Father in heaven (chapters twenty through twenty-six).

\* Act Five. Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

Begins with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers the followers of Jesus to spread the good news of all that God has done in him. Many are converted and the church grows and spreads. Act five is the part of the drama in which we live (chapters twenty-seven through twenty-nine).

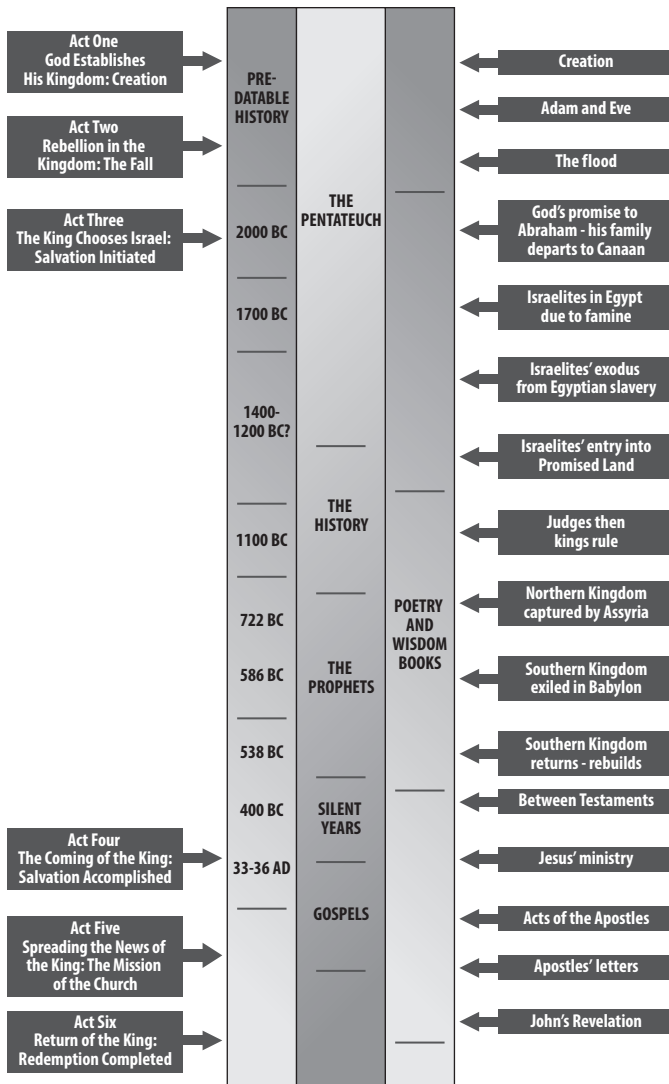
\* Act Six. The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

Looks forward to the time when Jesus will come again in glory, bringing history to an end, ushering in the new heaven and earth, and establishing God's rule over everything (chapter thirty).

As you'll see, once we plunge into the story of the Bible, God is the central character, and he is consistently portrayed as the great King. Psalm 99:1 (NLT), for example, begins, "The LORD is king!" If you look at our six acts above, you will see that God's kingship or rule is the golden thread that holds the whole of the Bible together. Of course, unlike far too many kings in history, God rules, as we will see, with our best interests and those of his creation at heart.

The first three acts cover the Old Testament, the last three the New Testament. We will alert you throughout to which act you are in. We recommend that you memorize these six acts, even if you don't fully understand them at present. We will explain them as we go along but memorizing them now will provide you with useful hooks to hang the developing story on so that you'll be able to remember it.

The second framework is a timeline. Just as the six acts will keep you oriented on our journey, so too will the timeline. Much of the Bible is about God acting in history, and as you move through the story of the Bible, you'll find it helpful to refer back to the timeline to see just where you are in the great story of the Bible. The Bible is made up of two major parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. As you can see, the Old Testament covers the story from the creation of the world to the time before Jesus. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus and all that happened as a result.



**Figure 1.2.** Bible history timeline

## 2

# CREATION



ONCE I (PAIGE) WAS DRIVING through a particularly beautiful mountain range, enjoying the majestic scenery and listening to one of my favorite singers, Louis Armstrong. He was singing, “I see trees so green, red roses too, I see them bloom for me and you.” Just as I crested the mountaintop and was able to see a vista of extraordinary beauty stretching to the horizons, the chorus of the song came on, “And I think to myself, ‘What a wonderful world.’” It was a showstopping moment. Perhaps you have had a similar experience while watching a majestic sunrise or sunset in a magical setting, or when you’ve found yourself surrounded by the awakening beauty of spring. It is hard to experience such beauty and not reflect on where it has come from.

The Bible’s answer is found in Genesis 1—it all comes from God, the Creator. Of course, in our modern world people have many questions about this, questions like, Can we really still believe in God as Creator

today? How does creation relate to science and evolution? These are important questions, but it is just as important to remember that the authors of the Bible were not thinking about such questions as they wrote. Therefore, when it comes to creation we need first to listen to the Bible on its own terms before asking how its message relates to our questions today.

The biblical story takes us way back through the mists of time to “in the beginning.” The cosmos and our world have not always existed; there was a “beginning” when the entire cosmos was brought into existence or created by God. It is appropriate, then, that the Bible, the story of our world, begins with these words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

“The heavens and the earth” is a way of saying “absolutely everything!” If, for example, you wanted to refer to the whole of a person, you might say, “She is wonderful from the tips of her toes to the hair on her head,” meaning that you love everything about her. The opening verse of the Bible does the same thing: from the earth all the way to the heavens, *every single thing* is made by God.

It is worth pausing to let the enormity of this sink in. Craig grew up in South Africa, and when he returns to his homeland, it is not uncommon to find stickers on items saying, “Made in South Africa.” So too, in America we find stickers saying, “Made in America.” From the Bible’s perspective, every single thing in creation would have to have a sticker on it saying, “Made by God”: kingfishers and worms, rainbows and sunsets, individuals and nations, human capacities to think, run, jump, dance, enjoy sex, and more. For those who sometimes think that faith in God is just about being spiritual and has little to do with the



material aspects of our world, we see in the very first chapter in the Bible that nothing could be further from the truth.

Genesis 1 tells about God's creation of light and time, of the sky, the oceans, and the earth. God sets up the sun and the moon and the stars in the sky, thereby introducing seasons into our life on earth. Once the three major places on earth are established—the earth, the sky, the seas—God provides inhabitants for each of them: sea

creatures for the oceans; birds for the sky; and plants, animals, and humans for the land. At every point of his creative work God contemplates it and declares it “good,” and when he has finished creating the world, he declares it “very good.” It is an astonishing vision of all of life—with all its diversity and wonder—as God's creation.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of the world as “charged with the grandeur of God,” an expression that captures what it means for the world to be “very good.” Through television programs like *Blue Planet*, we are becoming aware of the immense variety of sea creatures, all made by God. For those of us who are gardeners or farmers, the wonderful variety of plants and flowers comes from God. For those of us who enjoy gazing at the stars and the planets, all are from God. The

Bible opens with the whole of the world in view and declares that it all originates from God.

If, like us, you love art, Genesis 1 is like being taken to the most extraordinary exhibition you have ever seen. But imagine if, even as you are exploring the exhibition with wide eyes, a friend comes up to you and asks, “Would you like to meet the artist?” Of course, your answer would be, “Yes.” This is exactly what the Bible does in its opening chapters. Yes, the creation is wonderful, but even more wonderful is the One who made it, and a major aim of the Bible is to introduce us to the Creator God. What is the Creator like? The opening words begin to provide our answer.

As the Creator, God is, first, royalty par excellence. He is the great King. In the world in which the Old Testament—the first part of the Bible—was written, kings were often thought of as gods and wielded great power. But God’s kingship exceeds all earthly kings. A king’s word might be a command, but God simply says, “Let there be . . .” and that part of creation is ushered into existence. God is all powerful.

Second, some people have a spaceman view of God—he is there but distant and uninvolved in our world. On the contrary, this chapter reveals a God who speaks and sees and ponders his handiwork. Like any good craftsperson, he is deeply interested in what he has made.

Third, God is one; he is the one and only God. In the world in which the Old Testament was written, the nations believed in thousands of different gods, and they had all sorts of stories about them and temples for their worship. The early readers of Genesis 1 would have noticed that when two of these “gods,” the sun and the moon, are created (see Genesis 1:14-19), the Bible deliberately avoids using the words “sun” and

“moon,” referring to them instead as “the greater light” (the sun) and “the lesser light” (the moon). Why? To make it quite clear that they are not gods but part of God’s creation with a specific function in his universe. God is the one and only God.

Fourth, God is wonderfully loving and kind. A common view among the ancient nations was that the gods created humans because they were tired of doing all the chores and work, and thus they made humans to serve them as slaves so they could relax and party. In this view the gods are all too human: selfish, lazy, and self-serving, with no real interest in the humans they created. God is completely and gloriously different. He sets up the created world as the ideal home for humankind, as the place in which we can flourish and become fully and wonderfully human, as we will see in the next chapter.

Having listened to the opening story of the Bible on its own terms, we can see that many of us make the mistake of reading the opening chapters of the Bible with our twenty-first-century questions about science and evolution front and center. These are important questions, but we first need to listen to the powerful message of these chapters before engaging such questions. Although we cannot answer these questions fully here, do note that the opening chapters of the Bible tell us mainly about *who* created the world rather than *how* he created it. Rightly understood, there is no conflict between the best science and the Bible. Indeed, the view of the world as creation, and thus as ordered and capable of being known, motivated scientific study—and continues to motivate it, albeit often unconsciously. As the great twentieth-century Christian writer C. S. Lewis pointed out, “Men became scientific because they expected Law in

Nature, and they expected Law in Nature because they believed in a Legislator.”<sup>1</sup> Science looks for order in the creation, and it can only be found because God put it there and created us with minds fitted to explore and discover God’s ways with his world.

We cannot understand the rest of the Bible if we do not grasp creation. Just as the opening act in a drama sets the stage for all that is to come, so everything that follows stems from creation and takes place within creation. Creation sets the scene for all that will unfold in the rest of the Bible.

A part of God’s creation is humanity, and we are surprised to read his declaration of humanity as “very good.” But we know humanity is not very good. What happened, where did it go wrong, and does God care? Is he doing anything about it? This is the storyline we will follow throughout the rest of this book, a storyline that takes a dramatic turn in chapter four. But first we need to understand what God intended for humankind in the first place. That we find in the next chapter.

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**READING:** Genesis 1:1–2:3

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# 3

## ADAM AND EVE

Why Are We Here?



**H**AVE YOU EVER BEGUN reading a book only to find you need to go back to the opening chapter again to understand what's happening later on? We have, and for good reason. The opening scene, the opening words, provide important clues for understanding what is to come. The same is true of the Bible. We will not understand the rest of the biblical story if we do not grasp the initial story of creation. Everything that follows stems from it, setting the scene for all that will unfold.

The same is true in our own lives. It helps to know where we come from so that we can understand who we are and why we respond as we do. It's no wonder, then, that if you ask almost anyone to name their biggest life questions, you will likely hear something like, "Why am I here? Why does the world exist? What is its origin? Do humans matter? If there is a God, is he involved or concerned with what goes on?" These

and so many other questions have been asked by humans down through the ages. In fact, we see this question posed in the hymnbook of the Old Testament, the Psalms. Psalm 8 begins by reflecting on God's greatness as the Creator and then poses this question:

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

“What are human beings? And does God really care about us?” We struggle with these questions most intensely when a crisis strikes, but the answers often seem so elusive. The biblical story provides us with vital and thought-provoking answers to these questions.

In the biblical story, we find that humans share a lot in common with animals, but we also find that they are very different. Only of humans is it said that they were created *in God's image*, in his likeness (Genesis 1:26-28). This is, in fact, a high point of the opening story of the Bible, but what does it mean? If you think about how great God is, this is an astonishing thing to say about humans. Imagine if we met your mother or your daughter and said to you, “Oh, she is your spitting image!” You might not like it, but you would know exactly what we meant.

In the same way, being made in God's image means that in some fundamental way we are *like* God. But how exactly? After all, there are so many ways in which we are not like God. Humans, for example, can only be in one place at one time, whereas God can be everywhere.

In the last chapter we noted that Genesis introduces God to us as the great King. Well, Genesis 1 tells us God created humanity in his image to be his royal stewards, placed in his creation to rule over it, care for it, and develop all the potential God has placed in it. By *rule*, the Bible does not mean exploit for our own purposes. Just as God is wonderfully other-person centered in creating an ideal home for us, so we are to live under his rule and to be *like him* in the exercise of our human rule, caring for creation and developing its potential so that God's glory is ever more clearly seen in his good creation.

Of course, to care for God's creation, we need to be a particular type of being; that is, being made in God's image also means that we are persons like God. Unlike animals, we can speak, think, and enter consciously into deep relationships in ways that animals cannot. Indeed, *conscious* relationality is at the core of what it means to be human, and in Genesis 2 and 3 the different relations that constitute humans come into focus.

The whole world is created as the ideal home for humans, but we cannot live everywhere, and so, after God creates the first couple, Adam and Eve, he establishes them in a particular place—namely, the Garden of Eden, meaning “delight.” This magnificent home is also a place for them to work and develop. Adam and Eve have bodies and are related to the particular part of the world they inhabit. As bodies they need to eat to live, and the great park of Eden contains all the fruits and vegetables they will need to cultivate and to enjoy.

The first couple are farmers and park wardens of Eden, reminding us that part of being human is working, whether as a farmer, carpenter, businessperson, homemaker, etc. In our modern world many of us experience work as dreary and oppressive, and we will come to the reasons

for that, but this should not detract from the fact that part of being human is to work.

Being human also means being male or female (Genesis 1:27); both men and women are created in the image of God. In Genesis 2 we read that none of the animals could fulfill Adam's need for companionship, so God created Eve, leading Adam to respond with a poem of joy and gratitude (Genesis 2:23). Man and woman are designed to complement each other



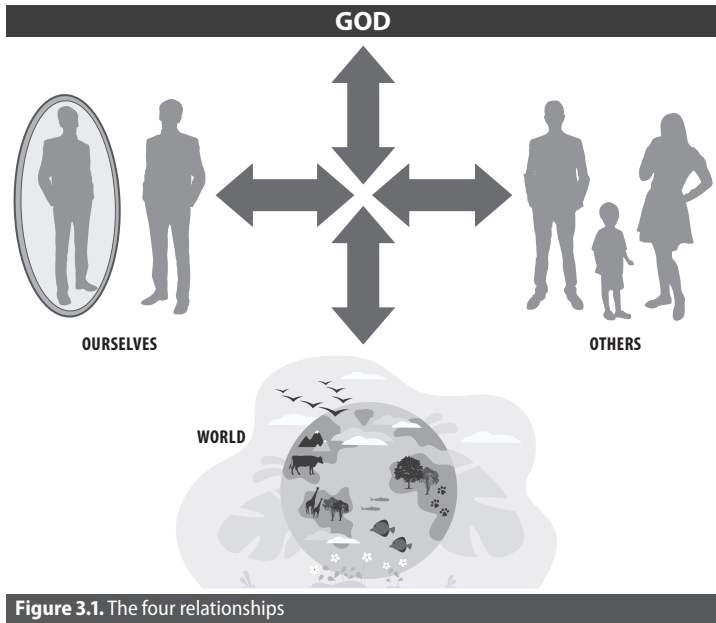
and the first couple does precisely that. Here we see the gift of marriage as a major way in which humans are intended to experience intimacy and companionship. Of course, not all of us are married. Paige is married to Bob. Craig is not married. But all of us need relationships with other humans to be human, whether those of marriage, family, or friends. We are made to love and to be loved, and as we are loved and love, we become fully alive.

But we aren't only made for relationship with the world and with one another—most importantly, we're made for relationship with God. We noted in our previous chapter that God is not a spaceman God, far off and distant. We learn that having placed Adam and Eve in Eden, God used to come and walk in the park, conversing with Adam and Eve. We can only imagine their conversations and deep fellowship

(Genesis 3:8). God is not far off. He made us for himself. Even as we live, work, and relate to one another, God wants to be deeply involved with us.

A helpful way to depict God's creation of humans as relational beings through and through is figure 3.1.

This diagram illustrates the four major relationships involved in our humanity. We are made above all else for a deep, personal relationship with God. Part of being in God's image is that we are conscious of ourselves; that is the relationship on the left-hand side, our relationship with ourselves. Some of us, for example, spend a long time making ourselves presentable before we go out shopping or to meet friends



**Figure 3.1.** The four relationships

because we are conscious of how we look and how we appear to our fellow humans. We are meant to have a healthy view of ourselves; indeed, without one we cannot relate well to others. We are God's special creatures, but we are not God. As we have seen, we are not made to be isolated but are designed for deep relationships with others, the right-hand side. Finally, as humans we relate to the world and serve God by working in it and developing its potential so that God's glory is more and more visible in his handiwork.

We subtitled this chapter "Why Are We Here?" We are here because God put us here as his image bearers. We are made to love deeply and to be loved deeply. All four relationships that make up our humanity are meant to operate in harmony with one another. This exhilarating picture answers the question, What are human beings and why are we here?

Why then, does our experience too often feel far removed from this wonderful picture? What has gone wrong? We turn to that topic in the next chapter.

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**READINGS:** Psalm 8 and Genesis 2:4-25

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