



Angie Smith

# W O W E N

Understanding the Bible as  
One *Seamless* Story

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One *Seamless* Story

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For Jenn, who decided to follow Jesus and taught me  
more than I will ever be able to teach anyone else.

J, you're everything your big sister wants to be,  
and I love you more than you'll ever know.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Bible.

*Holy Bible.*

All those pages.

Such thin, thin pages.

For many years of my life, that's kind of all the Bible seemed to be to me. To be honest, I didn't give it a ton of thought for the majority of that time. I wasn't raised in a Christian home, and I never had a desire to learn more about Scripture. I knew enough to know the Bible was important, of course—knew it was certainly important to all those grandmas and good girls and other Jesus-people who carried it with them so faithfully to church each week.

I have vivid memories of the sweet family who took me to church with them for several Sundays. I remember the pews and the holy silence there. It was intriguing to me because I did feel something that I couldn't quite put into words. I think there are a million ways a person can feel a tug toward faith and not know what to do with it.

I also went because I loved the smell of the leather in their Volvo and the sound of Bach blasting around me.

But I could never understand those crisp, crinkly Bible pages. They taunted me. *Taunting tissue.* That's what the Bible felt like.

And I hated that. Because I'm a pretty bright person. I tend to pick up on things fairly quickly, can usually get my mind wrapped around stuff—even complicated stuff—if I'm curious enough about it and committed enough to figuring it out. But the Bible was just different. I couldn't

make any sense of it. Even after I really *wanted* to make sense of it. It was frustrating.

What I've found out in the years since, however, is that . . . here, I'll whisper it to you: *we all kind of feel that way, don't we?*

If you said no, I'm going to go ahead and ask you to look for something else to read, because I don't think you're being honest with me. *We all* struggle to understand the Bible. You know we do.

That's because the Bible is unlike any other book in all the world. Part of the reason for this—and we wouldn't know it simply by looking at it—is that the Bible is not just a book. It's a library of books. It's made up of historical accounts and spiritual instruction and handwritten letters and—just some outright beautiful writing—prophecy, poetry, praise songs, personal conversations. Each book of the Bible gives us deeper, additional insights into what God was saying or doing with his people during specific points along the time line. And while a lot of it does read like a continuously running narrative, with page after page of an ongoing story arc that you can track and trace and follow along with, other parts of it are there for different reasons than that.

Some of the books, for instance, like Ruth and Esther, break off to tell a single, isolated story. Others, like the books of Old Testament prophecy or the letters of Paul, sort of telescope outward from parts of the story that are told elsewhere.

[Side note to you: if you've never heard of Ruth or the Old Testament or Paul or anything else you just read, I am SO EXCITED you're here. You're going to look back to this page when you're done and say with a laugh, "Who doesn't know the background story of Paul and why it's such a spectacular example of the gospel?" Promise.]

One particular book, in fact—the book of Job—which appears near the middle of the Bible (pronounced JOBE, not JOB), dates all the way back toward the beginning, more like where Genesis is. Yes, you read that correctly.

So, I may as well break the news to you now in case you need some time to process it.

*The books of the Bible are not entirely in order.*

I know. It complicates things. When you're reading, you can't always assume the next book is automatically the next thing that happened chronologically.

The reason I mention it up front here is only because if you've ever felt as overwhelmed as I did when I first tried piecing the Bible together . . . *don't*. Who is up to the task of reading a sixty-six-volume set (of anything!) and keeping up with all the information, all the characters' lives, getting all the details down right, and synthesizing it perfectly? Without any help?

And yet even as a collection of more than five dozen books featuring various types of literature, written by forty authors spanning sixteen hundred years, this Book is actually—drumroll!—the telling of *one single story*. We will see Jesus woven (yes, intended) throughout every single bit of it. And that's the part some people have missed about the Bible and about *him*. (I know I had.) He shows up in places we never knew to look.

The Bible has the distinct honor of being the only book that is alive. Sounds strange, I know, but it's true. It is active. It *pierces* us. In case you want to double-check me, that's what the Bible actually says about itself. You'll find it in the book of Hebrews. Which is also not exactly placed in the right order chronolo . . .

Too soon?

Don't panic.

The only important thing to remember right now—and I promise we're going to keep it this simple all the

way through—is that God is the one who’s telling this story. He’s the one who *wrote* this story. He’s the one who started *living* this story and who chose to put it into words for us so that we could hear it straight from his mouth, and could keep hearing it, over and over and over and over again.

But we don’t want to miss the bigger picture, and the only way we can see it is to pull back the lens.

You may not know one single piece of Scripture. That’s okay. You’re welcome to hang out here, and I give you my word you’re going to be impressed with yourself as you read. Or maybe you’ve written a dissertation on the different viewpoints of the rapture and you’ve memorized three-quarters of the Bible. I hope you get something out of this book as well, even if it’s just an appreciation for the fonts and the cool maps. Everyone loves the maps (or learns to).

I assure you I’m not going to continue saying it this way throughout all the coming chapters, but I need to say it again right here: God has *woven* himself into his Word and into his people, and the best way for us to follow that thread is to begin tugging on it.

So how do we do that?

Maybe the dissertation lady would like to jump in here.

But truth be told, you’ve already got everything you need for understanding it. And I’m truly, deeply grateful that you’re here. It’s the most amazing story. And you ARE going to understand it.

So go ahead and crease the corner of this page. And when you finish the book, I want you to flip back and see if I kept my promise. Feel free to write me nasty emails if you feel like I didn’t. I have an amazing assistant, and I will never see them.

But in all seriousness, I’m praying for you right this second.

## INTRODUCTION

I know you're going to love the way the Bible is woven together.

Sorry. I had to.

## Chapter 1

# THE TIME I SCARED LITTLE KIDS' PARENTS



I was in my early twenties when a couple of new friends invited me to a Bible study. I didn't have a clue what that was, but it sounded equal parts intriguing and horrifying, so I agreed to go.

I didn't think of myself as stupid. I was actually in grad school at the time and was the kind of person who didn't give up on anything until I completely understood it. I held impressive college degrees, had published my own academic papers, and was on full scholarship to one of the most prestigious schools in the country—all at the ripe young age of twenty-three. (As writers, we have editors who sometimes add in sentences that make us sound more exciting than we are. Which is why I left in that last one.)

All I needed to do, these girls told me, was go down to the local Christian bookstore and buy a copy of some workbook that we were going to be covering. Sounded simple enough.

So, one day after classes, I drove downtown and found the place. But I realized fairly quickly that this was the kind of parking lot where you turn down the sound of the Beastie Boys when you pull in. I took one look at the posters and the window displays and saw that these were not my people. So I left.

Still, I went to the Bible study anyway, sans workbook. Wasn't a problem. The leader was the kind of southern girl

who didn't show up without extra snacks and workbooks. So we all sat on the floor, and I marveled at the whole awkward scene. The lady on the video we were watching would say something like, "Turn to Isaiah, chapter fifty-three," and all fifteen of the other girls opened their Bibles to that exact page simultaneously. Or at least I'm pretty sure I'm remembering that correctly. So, all over again, it was like I was back in that store parking lot, on the outside looking in, wondering how a girl with my past and my problems and my obvious lack of experience with how Bible studies operate was going to make it through the rest of the evening, much less several more weeks of this business, which I'd been told would be the expected time frame.

But I was determined to stick with it. I'm Italian. I had my workbook now. I kind of understood the order of stuff (prayer, talking, snacks, video, more talking, more snacks, more prayer, etc.). So between that night and the time of the next week's meeting, I dug out the only copy of the Bible I owned. (Laugh at your discretion. It was a "Precious Moments" edition.) I spent about an hour and a half attaching sticky notes inside it, marking the pages where the workbook said we'd be looking up Bible verses during the upcoming session.

Ha! I *had* this.

The visual of me walking into that Bible study after a class on applied linear statistical models still makes me laugh. (Yes, that was the name of a real class, and I was the teaching assistant. God bless those kids. I basically showed up with cute hair and acted like I knew what I was doing. This particular strategy has always served me well.) But, oh, sweet little Angie—you really thought you could pull the same tricks with Christianity, didn't you?

That's how it went. Week after week. I planned on adding it to my résumé of adventures and education.

What I *didn't* plan on was falling in love with Jesus.

But the nerd in me is never too far away, so I did what any logical person would do. Except not at all. *I braved the bookstore*. Only I didn't run straight to the four-inch-thick books the way I would've done if I was investigating most other subjects. Instead, I went and sat crisscross-applesauce in the kids' area and pulled out Bibles written for four-year-olds, right there with the stuffed vegetables that were entertaining the (other?) kids around me.

And despite the fact that a few moms were probably keeping a closer eye on their kids than they'd been doing before I got there, it was actually a roaring success. I even *bought* a couple of those Bible storybooks. And, I swear, I'll never forget the indescribably sweet season of time that followed, when I'd come home to my little apartment after school each day, head out on my balcony, open up those brightly colored Bibles, and read the amazing stories someone had rewritten for the children in their life.

All of a sudden, I realized there was a story in the Bible.

I know—and, again, God bless those sweet college students. I'm sorry their parents paid 1903758302 dollars for them to go to Vanderbilt and learn about the importance of applying texturing spray before flat ironing.

Up until then, for example, I'd hear a story about, oh . . . Samson, let's say. Samson and Delilah. I remember knowing that Delilah was bad. No clue where I learned it. I also knew the same about Jezebel. I did not know Jezebel would be eaten by dogs later, but that's for another book. I knew some of these names, but I didn't have any idea where they fell in the story of Scripture. Samson was super-strong, maybe not the brightest guy, whose girlfriend tricked him into letting her cut his hair because she knew he would lose all his power until it grew back, and she stood to make a killing in bribe money if she could pull it off. That's a good one. Who knew his hair would grow back and he'd end up pushing down the main supporting beams of a big

building one day with his bare hands and kill a bunch of people, himself included. The little kids' books naturally didn't go into great detail on all of this, but . . .

*Okay, I would think, when I'd come across Samson in my Bible now, or in a teaching that I'd heard. Samson goes HERE . . . in the book of Judges . . . and the judges came between the time of JOSHUA (when Israel entered the Promised Land) and SAMUEL (the last judge), who ushered in the first Israelite kings, Saul and David.*

Samson, Samuel, Joshua, King Saul—they stopped being for me these disembodied names who just floated around somewhere inside my rough, raw-data knowledge base of the Bible. Slowly but surely, I started growing in my ability to pin the stories, events, and details of their lives into the spots they actually occupied in Scripture.

And from there, anchored around those pins, I could start to draw lines tying them together. And the more lines I drew—between more and more of these happenings and sayings and key moments that stood out to me from the Bible—all those loose, straggly threads of connection began to flatten out for me, weaving themselves (oh, my gosh, I cannot stop—is there a hotline for this sort of thing?), yes, *weaving* themselves around each other.

That's when I saw it. It was *all one story*. It is *all one story*. Sixty-six books, and yet *all one story*.

I still can't quite describe for you how empowering this discovery felt to me, and feels to me even now. By no means did I turn into an overnight Bible scholar. In an unexpected turn of events, I am still not a Bible scholar. But I act confident, and that helps.

So here we go.

Couple of things first, by way of caveat: (1) *We won't be covering everything*. What we're embarking on here is a flyover. We'll be picking out the big landmarks of the Bible together, as well as the significant pathways and patterns

that run between them. And while we'll hover over several important points to take a closer look, the main purpose of this journey is to get the general lay of the land. By the time we touch down again at the end of these pages, you'll walk away with an insider's awareness on the grand story of Scripture. You'll have seen it with your own eyes.

Also, (2) *We won't be solving every theological question.* Maybe that'll be the next book you read. Maybe you'll jump from here into exploring a particular theme or doctrine from the Bible, wanting to find out how someone else interprets it. Bright, well-intentioned believers can come to various conclusions on a lot of different things, as you know, and God gives us plenty of leeway to seek him together despite our areas of healthy debate. But we won't be doing any debating in this book. Not that I don't have my own reasoned, prayerful opinions on stuff, but the main thing I'm praying for on this trip is for clear skies. If we clog it up with extra baggage, with distracting sidebar arguments, we'll never get there.

And this time, friend, *we're getting there.* Wherever you've felt the need to cover for your lack of biblical fluency, whether real or self-perceived, those days are now coming to a quick and confident end. Granted, you'll never know everything there is to know. We weren't created with the capability for articulating all the mysteries of God. But the Author of this story didn't write it for only a handful of experts to understand while it baffles the rest of us. He wrote it for you, and for me, knowing that he created us to understand it with no need for commentaries and seminars. Those are great, but those are extras.

*So why aren't we looking at Genesis yet, Angie?*

Hang on. We're close.

It's because I really do have a couple more important things to say at the outset.

*First, remember the Bible is real.* Now I know you knew that, but because we rightly use the language of "story" to

talk about what's written in Scripture, the temptation at least exists to treat it as mere literature or as some sort of mythology. And I want to dismiss that thought entirely, even in how you approach this little book I've written *about* the Bible.

*Second, read it with the end in mind.* I'm assuming at this point that the biblical roadmap feels a bit fuzzy and disjointed for you. That's okay. That's why we're here. But at the end of this chapter, I've included a two-page, nicely designed layout of the seamless story line of Scripture. And I encourage you to keep turning to it, all along the way. Familiarize yourself with it. Know where we're going.

It's not cheating.

Because when we start, we'll be hitting a lot of huge, foundational events and concepts right out of the gate, and they'll require a few pages to explain. So it'll take us a little while to ramp up before we start to feel like we're making much progress. It might seem slow, but I assure you I have a plan. And part of the reason we won't bog down is because, when we're talking about Adam and Eve, for example, we won't just be talking about Adam and Eve. We won't merely be dealing with the early chapters of Genesis. We'll already be looking ahead, weaving them (my editor added this one; I take zero responsibility) into the much larger story of the Bible—how God, in his love for humankind, chose to deal with this rupture in relationship that Adam and Eve began, and how the rest of the Bible is the telling of that story.

So keep a second bookmark between those pages I mentioned, where I've included all the spoilers. And rather than hanging back as you're reading and letting yourself be surprised by what's next, choose to be surprised instead by how quickly God is strengthening your grasp on the whole Bible—all because you're reading it with the end in mind, even from the start.

Throughout this book, as often as possible, I'll make comments as to how whatever part of the Bible we're

studying connects with something that's still centuries down the biblical road. That's because the more time you and I spend becoming articulate with the big picture, the more color and detail we'll see in every picture.

You'll often notice, too, that when I quote directly from Scripture, I will mention the verse I'm referring to. Don't be intimidated by that, if it's something new to you. Don't get worried if you have no clue what they mean. You will.

*Lastly, pray.* You may have never even tried to pray before, or you may be a pastor's kid who prayed before you learned to talk. Either way, you can ask God to give you supernatural understanding, to fill you with a new joy and delight in his Word. Pray that he will make things clear to you in a way you've possibly never seen in the Scriptures before. Tell him you truly want to know this story, not so that you can more confidently hold your own in Sunday school or Bible study, but—as I said before—simply because you want to know him.

My prayer for you is that, like me, you'll experience your own version of my balcony moments without having to sit in the kids' section of the bookstore. (Though, of course, you should still go to bookstores.) They are magical to me. Bookstores have always been my safe place. I go there when I'm sad, when I'm curious, when I just need to take a break and breathe. Books are the love of my life. Stories are what have held me together.

That's why I can tell you, with much more confidence than I had when teaching classes I could barely pronounce, that all stories have an arc. There's the beginning, the rising action, the climax, and the eventual resolution. In order to model that structure, many of them start with those four classic words, "Once upon a time . . ." But my absolute favorite story, written by the inspiration of my favorite Author, opens with only three:

*In the beginning . . .*



CREATION

MAN & WOMAN



FALL



FLOOD



TOWER



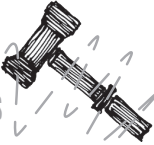
PROMISED LAND



TEMPLE



JUDGES



UNITED KINGDOM

DIVIDED KINGDOM



EXILE

RETURN



BORN



DISCIPLE

