

“Lively, insightful, and deeply profound—this is what we have come to expect from Andrew Wilson, and exactly what we find in this breathtaking sweep through the epic story of the whole Bible.”

SAM ALLBERRY, Associate Pastor, Immanuel Nashville

“Andrew Wilson is a remarkably gifted writer and Bible teacher with a solid understanding of Christian theology, and in *Gospel Stories* he repeatedly uses fascinating examples from contemporary science, business, history, cinema, and just plain ordinary life to bring the entire scope of the Bible’s teaching to life in refreshing new ways.”

WAYNE GRUDEM, PhD, Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary

“Stories are the language of humanity and the primary language of Scripture. But somewhere in our attempts to distill only the principles, we’ve lost the narrative art so prevalent among God’s people for thousands of years. Andrew Wilson is bringing it back. With insight grounded in orthodoxy and the manner of a friend over coffee, Andrew arrests our attention and captures our imagination ... Will make you fall in love with the living Word all over again.”

GLENN PACKIAM, Lead Pastor of Rockharbor Church in Costa Mesa, California

“This book is the best kind of biblical theology: showing the richness, beauty and unity of the Scriptures. Andrew Wilson really believes Jesus’s words ‘these Scriptures testify about me’ which means this book isn’t afraid to take some unfamiliar parts of Scripture (as well as some familiar ones) and show their place in the Bible’s rich portrait of Christ. Like a ‘taster menu’ in a restaurant, each chapter is rich and satisfying, worth taking time over, yet also leaves us wanting more—to go and search the Scriptures ourselves. The 26 short chapters on the Old Testament alone are worth the price of the book, and form a superb overview of this less familiar half of the Bible. This book will not just stretch our minds, but more importantly, warm our hearts. Each chapter gives a beautiful new angle onto our Savior who is ‘altogether lovely’, so slow down, take time, and taste and see that the Lord is good.”

MATT SEARLES, author and songwriter

ANDREW
WILSON



How the greatest story is richer,
deeper, and more wonderful than we think



GOSPEL
STORIES



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Introduction

Imagine for a moment that you are in a dark room, holding a clear crystal in one hand and a torch in the other. You shine the torch through the crystal at one angle, and the stone appears to glow as the white light travels through it. Then you change the angle at which you're holding the crystal. A dazzling green appears. Then you turn it again, and you get scarlet. Then you get a rusty orange, followed by teal, followed by indigo—a multitude of colors emerge as the light refracts. Each small movement uncovers a shade you would never have noticed if you'd only looked once and then stopped. To fully appreciate the crystal in all of its splendor, you have to explore it for some time, looking at it from every conceivable angle.

The same is true of the gospel.

In a sense, the gospel is one story: the story of the life, death, resurrection, rule and return of the Lord Jesus Christ. But it's also many stories. It is the narrative of God, creation, Israel, Christ and the church. It is a tale of redemption, victory, sacrifice and substitution. It is a love story, a martial epic, a cosmic symphony, a court history, a non-linear movie, a sweeping tale of temples and kingdoms and families and gardens. If you ask people from twenty different countries

to describe it, you will get twenty different ways of narrating the same events, as each cultural lens picks out a distinctive aspect of God's story across time. Each version will show you something. None will show you everything.

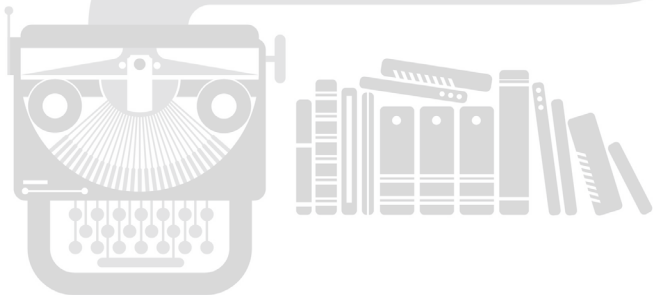
We need a bigger grasp of that story. It didn't start and end with Holy Week; indeed, the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday are only "good news" because they serve as the culmination of a much larger story, with thousands of characters, numerous subplots and plenty of twists. We can see the gospel in the Garden of Eden, up the Tower of Babel, on Mounts Ararat and Sinai, in the songs of David and the proverbs of Solomon, and right the way through to the raucous roar at the end of Revelation. Each shard of gospel light brings a fresh perspective to the whole, and enlarges our vision of what God has done and who he is.

This book is an invitation to increase our appreciation and enjoyment of the good news by turning the crystal a few dozen times. It is an invitation to reflect, to marvel, to delight. It is an invitation to Gospel Stories.

ACT ONE



CREATION AND FALL



CREATION THROUGH CHRIST

For by him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth, visible
and invisible, whether thrones or
dominions or rulers or authorities—all
things were created through him and
for him. And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

(Colossians 1:16-17)

Creation tells us stories about God every day, if only we have eyes to see. The heavens weave a tale about his glory, the stars tell of his sustaining power, the sun and moon write a poem about God's otherness. Human bodies speak about God's careful and wonderful design, and numerous creatures display his wisdom. From the moment Genesis announces "In the beginning, God created," the story begins.

Relative to space, earth is pretty small. The northern lights on Jupiter (which itself measures a tiny fraction of the size

of any star) are bigger than our entire planet. But relative to the earth, everything we might otherwise think of as huge is actually tiny. We tend to think of mountains and ocean trenches as enormous ridges on the earth's surface, giving our planet the shape of an old cannonball, with massive bumps and craters everywhere. However, as big as these mountain ranges and ocean trenches are compared to us, they are tiny compared to the earth. In fact, relative to its size, the earth is smoother than a billiard ball, even with the Andes Mountains and the Java Trench.

But on the surface of this rather small planet, live billions of creatures which are so tiny that the vast majority of them cannot be seen with the naked eye. In the top inch of forest soil, there are three hundred and forty different animals under the area covered by my footprint. If I go for a short walk, I tread on top of hundreds of thousands of creatures, none of which I ever see. Each one lives in the care and providence of Almighty God. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:29).

These tiny creatures form the mere tip of the iceberg. Think about cells, for example. There are over one hundred million of them in the human eye alone. Bacteria cells are so miniscule that they carpet your body at all times without you ever realizing; when you wash your hands, you scrub off around five million of them into the sink.¹ "All things were created ... whether visible or invisible."

1 Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 18-19.

It doesn't stop there. Cells are themselves made up of even smaller entities, which we have only started to understand quite recently. The intestinal bacterium, which is small for a cell (about 0.0001cm wide), contains twenty thousand ribosomes, which are basically miniature chemical factories that produce protein molecules for the cell to use. Molecules are so small that we're required to use quite ridiculous analogies to visualize them. For instance, if you placed a water molecule next to an orange, the size difference would be similar to placing a pea next to earth. And then molecules are themselves composed of even more unimaginably small atoms.

When you get inside the atom, things become a little bit confusing, since there is quite a lot of dispute about what's in there. Chemists agree on electrons, neutrons and protons, but there appear to be even smaller particles within each of these, like leptons and quarks (as a frame of reference, a hydrogen atom is reckoned to weigh about two thousand times the mass of a lepton). While these almost infinitesimal particles are being theorized about—we have to theorize, you see, because even with electron microscopes they can't be seen—there remains huge debate about how they constitute matter at all, and what knits them together. In scientific terms, it's a mystery. But theologically, the answer is simple: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Creation points to the supremacy of Christ. "All things were created *through* him and *for* him." The heavens declare his glory, the earth his wisdom, the cell his providence and the lepton his inconceivable attention to detail. And he loves it:

...when he [Yahweh] marked out the foundations of the earth, then I [Jesus] was beside him, like a master workman ... rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.
(Proverbs 8:29-31)

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ..." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:26-27)

You are the second most sacred thing in the universe. If someone drew up a list of holiness starting with the most holy, God would be at the top, and immediately beneath him sits your name together with the twelve billion other people created in God's image over the last six thousand years. Not lions or cows, not mountain ranges or stars, and not even angels. People. You and I are completely unlike the rest of creation. We are made in the image of God.

That has lots of implications. It has implications on war and justice and abortion and sex trafficking. It has implications for worship and church and mission and art. If we rarely think

about those implications, we probably haven't really grasped how utterly radical Genesis 1:27 actually is.

The most obvious thing “in his own image” means is that we *resemble* God physically. That might sound shocking to some (and very obvious to others), but it's the truth: we look like God. That's what the words “image” and “likeness” normally mean. Sometimes we think that Jesus looked like us because he was God in *our* image. But that's back to front. We look like we do because he made us in *his* image. When God takes flesh—whether as Jesus, or as the angel of Yahweh, or the commander of Yahweh's army, or whatever—he looks like a human being, complete with large brain and vertical spine and opposable thumbs.

It's not just our bodies that image God. We also have the capacity to *reason* like God, in a way quite distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom. Sure, some animals can learn from experience and solve problems, but the faculty of abstract reasoning, best demonstrated in our use of language, remains uniquely human. Consider a small child learning English. The child catches a ball, and shouts with delight, “I caught it!” She's not repeating something; no one taught her the phrase. Instead, she linked together two abstract ideas—the verb “catch” and the past tense “-ed”—and combined them. That capacity to reason is uniquely human, and is a product of being made in the image of a reasoning, thinking God.

Now move onto the next clause: “male and female he created them.” God created both men and women in his image, so they could *relate* like God. Because God is three in one, he lives in community and relationship, therefore the creatures in his image do so as well. That's why God declared it a bad

idea for us to be alone: he made us for relationship with other people, and without it we cannot cope (which is why solitary confinement is such a severe punishment). Note also that both men and women are equally created in the image of God. Again, this may seem obvious to us today, in a culture shaped by biblical values for hundreds of years, but it was extremely radical when Scripture was written, and it still is in much of the world. Even Plato thought that women were reincarnated men who had lived poor lives, and Aristotle maintained that women were mutilated men produced by inadequate fathers. But Scripture is emphatic: humans are made for relationship, and both men and women image God.

If you read Genesis 1:28, you'll see two more aspects of God's image-bearers. Firstly, we *reproduce* like God. Just as God loves to create new things, and to make creatures that are just like him, so we desire to do the same. Secondly, and arguably the main point of the entire passage: being made in God's image means *ruling* like God. We are like God, and God rules over all things, so it is only natural that he should delegate to us, not to lions or cows or toucans, the governance of his world: "fill the earth," "subdue it," "have dominion over every living thing." That is part of what being created in God's image means.

So that's what the image of God is all about. And actually it's where most gospel stories start. God, as we read frequently in Scripture, wanted his glory to fill the whole earth, so he made human beings in his image—creatures who resembled, reasoned, related, reproduced and ruled like him—and told them to fill the earth. But they spoiled the image of God through sin. Every aspect of the image of God in humanity,

from physical wellbeing to mental processes to relationships to sex to good government, was distorted at the fall.

But the story doesn't end in tragedy. God set about the restoration of his image in people, his recovery of the way they had originally been created, so that his glory could truly fill the whole earth. In this sense, the rest of the Bible—Abraham, Moses, Israel, even Jesus—are part of this image-of-God story, the restoration of his image in us.

This restoration is important, because when people see you, they form conclusions about God. That's why people with abusive fathers struggle to conceive of God properly; God intended people to carry his image, showing the world what he is like. We stand to God rather like a photograph does to a person: helping those around us to picture someone they can't see.

You play a part in the most exciting project going on today: the restoration of the image of God in humanity. As a human being, you have value not just for what you do, but for who you are, and ultimately for who you represent—and so do the thirteen hundred people who have been born while you read this chapter. We all bear the image of God.