

Before We Begin

Nobody wants to feel stupid.

Nobody enjoys that moment at the auto repair shop when you get to the counter and they ask, "What seems to be the problem?"

Do you try to imitate the sound of the engine with your voice? For the mechanic behind the counter, I imagine that's more of a job perk than a helpful diagnostic tool.

Do you admit you don't know where the smoke is coming from because you couldn't figure out how to open the hood? Or do you just hand over the keys and pretend you didn't understand the question?

Then you have to make decisions based on their recommendations: "Your water pump needs to be replaced, but we can save you *money* if we replace the timing belt while we're in there because that *sucker* is hard to get to. We'll also check to see if you *broke* any valves or damaged any pistons."

All you hear is, "Blah blah blah...*money*...blah blah blah...*sucker*... blah blah blah...*broke*."

Nobody wants to feel stupid at the hardware store, or at the counter at Starbucks, or at the workout machines at the gym.

And nobody wants to feel stupid in church.

The pastor/minister/priest gets up and says, "At this time we are going to eat the body of Christ and drink the cup that is the blood of the covenant."

What did he say?

"The Eucharist is a reminder of Christ's atoning sacrifice so that we can be justified for our sins and sanctified through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit."

What? I thought Euchre was a card game we used to play in Indiana.

Later, the pastor/minister/priest shares a joke that was found on the Internet: "Remember—before Boaz was married, he was Ruth-less!"

People around you snicker. You look at them with your eyebrows raised and a slight smile, pretending you understand the reference. You assume you're the only one in the room who doesn't get it, but you're wrong. The room is *filled* with people who are pretending because they, like you, don't want to feel stupid in church.

Pile of Lumber

This book is a brief overview of human existence, broken down into seven parts. Its purpose is to help us understand and feel more confident with the Overall Christian story. It's an attempt to see and appreciate the proverbial "forest," instead of getting frustrated by the confusing and endless "trees."

Imagine every chapter, every verse, every parable, every idea from the Bible that you are familiar with is a two-by-four piece of wood. All those two-by-fours are now laid out on the ground and create a pile of lumber. For some, the pile is small. You didn't grow up attending church; you don't know the stories; you don't get the Boaz joke. For others, it's a rather massive pile of lumber—all mixed up and scattered on the ground.

Now, imagine adding two-by-fours for every notable moment in human history and every significant story in *your* life. That's a huge pile of wood. How do they all fit together?

Many people are passionate about the two particular pieces of wood that form the cross. They know the story of Jesus and many of the things he did and said, but how do those pieces fit with the Noah-and-the-ark two-by-four or the Muslim two-by-four?

This book is an attempt to take all that wood and build a framework for a beautiful and understandable structure. In the following pages, we will not just look at individual stories—we will be looking at the Overall story of humanity. This is important because the story we

believe we are living in shapes how we live our lives.

People who call themselves “Trekks” would know who Khan is. They might even go to conventions and speak Klingon. They would know the *Star Trek* story.

People who call themselves “gearheads” would hop under the car to take a look no matter what they were wearing or where they were headed. They wouldn’t imitate sounds to a mechanic at the repair shop.

If I call myself a “Christian,” isn’t it reasonable to expect that I would know the Christian story? The overall percentage is declining, but most Americans still identify themselves as Christian—most, as in more than 150 million people. But how many of these know the Overall story?

People in church don’t want to feel stupid. They don’t want to stare at a confusing pile of lumber. They want to know God’s story and how they fit into it.

Framework

I love structure. I’m a math guy. I remember when the world of calculus opened for me in high school. It was beautiful. I finally saw how the arithmetic pieces, and the geometric pieces, and the algebraic pieces, and the trigonometric pieces all fit together. Math was no longer irrelevant and isolated operations, repeated ad nauseam. It was all part of a grand and beautiful framework.

Okay, maybe that’s why I didn’t date many girls in high school.

I grew up in Canada in a non-Christian home located across the street from a small, loving church. The people at that church invited my brothers and me to attend, and my parents were happy to get a few weekly hours of silence. Over time, I learned multiple stories from the Bible, imprinted into my brain through the high-tech cut-outs that would stick to the flannel boards.¹ I became familiar with bits and pieces (two-by-fours), but I had no concept of the grand story (framework).

I tried to read the Bible because I was told it was critical for those who follow Jesus. I read the Book of Genesis about seventeen times, but significantly slowed down in the Book of Exodus when they repeated the details of the tabernacle. And getting through Leviticus was about as likely as me reading Shakespeare “just for fun.”

I had so many debilitating questions:

- How could Moses write the creation story when he wasn't alive until many years later?
- Where do the dinosaurs fit?
- How could Moses have written about his own death and how the people responded after he died?
- Why are there two versions of the stories of King Saul and King David? And why does the second version omit David's mistake with Bathsheba?
- Why do so many of the psalms sound like whining and complaining?

So I set the Bible down and went back to watching hockey.

Years later, I sensed a call to full-time ministry and attended seminary in Anderson, Indiana. One course was a survey of the Book of Romans. There were twenty students in the class, and the professor assigned each of us a different commentary (a book that provides interpretive explanation). We walked through the chapters in Romans and compared what the commentary writers had to say about each chapter. The professor would look around the room and say something such as, “Fuller, what did Schleiermacher think about Romans 1:17?”

I walked away with a degree but still had no sense of the Overall story. I dove deep into the minutiae of biblical languages and proper formatting for bibliographies, but I had no sense of the big picture. Lots of lumber; no framework.

My first full-time ministry job was at Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was an honor to be part of a team that was doing radical acts of kindness as a demonstration of God's love—and passionately singing simple love songs to Jesus. It was new, it was beautiful, it was life-changing. But in terms of understanding the grand

Christian story—more lumber, no framework.

Years later, I became the lead pastor of a church in Phoenix, Arizona. This provided me with the opportunity to start building a framework for the biblical story based on seven parts that run from creation through the end of time. In the congregation I served, we committed an entire year to walking this out. I enjoyed it so much that I did it again year after year, looking at different themes that run through the Overall story.

The seven parts of this framework form the structure of this book. Parts I and II summarize the Old Testament, and Parts III and IV cover the New Testament. Overviews of the Bible typically stop there, but the story does not. Part V zooms quickly through the two thousand years that connect the story of the Bible with our own. I consider Part VI to be the most miraculous one: God is not just inviting us to learn the story—he² is inviting us *into* the story. Then the final part looks at glimpses God has given us of the end of the story.

This book is somewhat of a *Choose Your Own Adventure*. If you feel rather solid about the Bible story, perhaps it would be best to jump to Part V and see how the story continues after the Bible. If you eagerly want to get to the most important part, skip to Part III and discover Jesus, the greatest two-by-four in the pile. If you're ready to explore the Overall story...clip on your toolbelt, and grab a hammer. Let's turn some lumber into framework.

1. The use of flannelgraphs used to be common practice in church classrooms to provide visuals that helped with learning. The first iPad, perhaps?

2. God is not male. Men and women are both created in God's image, and God demonstrates both masculine and feminine characteristics. God is God, and God is not bound by gender as we are. Throughout this book, I will use masculine pronouns for God due to the limitations of the English language, and for ease of reading.