

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.9**

# The complete Narrative

This tutorial discusses the fourth question in the area of *Word*: 'Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?'

## Last time

We noted that, although we're defining specific things in different categories in the life of a healthy, growing individual or group, those things actually function together seamlessly. As far as effectively establishing the authority of God's Word, there are many factors that work together. We stressed that its inherent authority is not in question; what we're wanting to understand is how that authority is *established* and what we should see when it is.

We noted these three points about the authority of God's Word being established:

- It is established by those who take the battle seriously, who know how to protect themselves, and how to use Truth effectively for breaking down the Enemy's defenses.
- It is shared in such a way that it is seen to answer both the big and small questions of life, and it addresses felt needs in light of real needs, i.e. real as God defines them.
- It is evidenced by people coming to a real understanding of God's grace, having a joyful assurance of salvation and through changed lives.

## The fourth question under "W" for *Word*

- Are they able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?
- Are they having God's Word presented to them in a way that allows it to enter and engage their hearts at a worldview level?
- Are they learning to give God's Word its proper place and authority?

- Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?
- Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?

This topic is another example of what we've already stressed: even though it is helpful for us to define these different threads of God's work in people's lives, these things don't function in isolation from each other. In the previous tutorial (7.8) we were talking about how the *authority* of God's Word is established. Now we're going to focus on how a correct *understanding* of God's Word comes about through seeing it as one complete and cohesive Narrative. But we should also notice the implications for authority here as well.

We've said previously that the actual authority of God is realised when His voice - His Word - is what dominates and shapes our thinking; when our ideas and experience are interpreted according to what He says. That authority breaks down (not in reality, but in how we submit to it) when there are gaps and inconsistencies. Of course sometimes this is the result of straightforward rebellion - when we know something to be true and yet we refuse to listen. But often our failures to yield to His authority are the result of confusion and not understanding how to relate Truth consistently to some area of life.

Let's imagine two hypothetical examples from very different settings:

## 1. Chris and Emma...

...who are both from non-believing backgrounds, have been living together for the last year. They hear the Gospel through a webcast and are saved. They start to occasionally attend a home group where they meet some couples who are married, unlike all their other friends. They also begin to have some questions about how to relate to some friends who are gay. In the past they had assumed, just like everyone else they knew, that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice and that anyone opposed to it is just intolerant and stuck in the past. Now they're not so sure, but they don't want to just unthinkingly assume a "Christian" perspective. They would really like to know what God says about all of this, but where do they start?

## 2. Mulu...

...a teenager, has been a believer for two years. His daily work is helping in the communal rice fields and vegetable gardens that provide food and also cash from the traders who come up from the coast in trucks each month. Twice a year the village gets together to sacrifice pigs to enlist the help of the spirits in ensuring good crops. Mulu has heard from some Christians in town that God does not want His children to be involved in such things. Normally he just

keeps in the background at the sacrifice and the last couple of times he's managed to quietly avoid eating the pig meat. But this time he has been chosen to represent his clan in the actual ritual sacrifice. To refuse will bring shame on his family. Everyone will believe that he's putting the spiritual harmony, and their livelihood in jeopardy. Surely God won't mind? What is he to do? How can he know what God's Word says?

## Are more Bible verses the solution?

A natural assumption we can make in thinking about these situations is that the missing ingredient is information; more Bible references - that what Chris and Emma and Mulu need most in their respective dilemmas is to be pointed to some Bible verses, perhaps with some teaching to help explain them. And indeed this may be helpful. Certainly seeing what God's Word says about some related circumstances or hearing specific instructions and exhortations that have been given in the past is not in itself a bad thing. But here are some questions worth asking:

1. Do they have a sufficient framework of understanding about the character of God for this section of the Bible to fit into?
2. Do they have enough background to place this portion of God's Word at least somewhat in its context? (Who was God communicating to and for what purpose? How is God's character and His purpose being revealed?)
3. Do they have an accurate picture of the Bible overall, especially in terms of its relevance to their daily lives?
4. Do they see these passages as integral parts of God's one, seamless Truth (i.e. rather than as scraps of Christian teaching...possibly true, but in a weak, fragmented sense)?
5. If they try to apply what they're hearing to their own circumstances will it be based on a clear understanding of God's actual view of them (i.e. rather than because they are trying to be worthy and to build credit with Him)?

Even though their cultural landscapes look very different, the formative worldviews of Chris and Emma and also Mulu are *pluralistic* - they are worldviews where Satan has successfully eroded the idea of absolutes. In a modern - or "post-modern" - humanist society, believing in one universal Truth (and any applications of it) is despised as outdated, intolerant fundamentalism. In turn, animistic worldviews are notoriously adept at absorbing new belief systems and holding them simultaneously, even if they appear contradictory to an outsider.

So with those backgrounds, how then can they come to see God's Word as completely authoritative? How can they have their dilemmas addressed in such a way that they will be entirely confident that this is God's voice and not just the opinion of some Christians or a church? And if they are exposed to a

portion of God's Word that seems to address the issue at hand, how can they know they're interpreting it correctly? What will protect them from the "Scripture-twisting" and confusion of the many cults and sects that would gladly draw them in? What would it take, if we were trying to disciple them, to answer the five questions above in the positive? (Try going back and reading those questions again as statements: "They have..." "They see..." "When they try..." etc.)

Before going on, let's remind ourselves of the original W.I.L.D. question that we're considering: *Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?*

## **What if Narrative foundations had been laid?**

Chris and Emma and Mulu have some immediate concerns, and if you had the opportunity to be part of their journey of faith, you would obviously need to give them some timely encouragement and help. But think how well prepared they'd be for anything you'd share with them if they'd already been exposed to God's Word as His complete Narrative. What if they had a clear understanding of how and why God created the universe, the world and ultimately, human beings? Imagine if you had been able to stand alongside them, as it were, and comment while together you'd observed God's earliest interactions with this race of His image-bearers that He'd made. If you'd watched with them when they heard about how Adam and Eve listened to Satan and then saw God's interaction with them and His response. And what if you'd been able to keep walking with them, so to speak, down through history, experiencing the highlights of God's record of His engagement with human beings? Until eventually you'd been able to introduce them to the promised Messiah, the Rescuer...and beside His disciples walked the roads of Palestine, and sat on a hillside while He healed people and shared God's message with them. And most importantly, if you'd helped them see how all the threads of who God is, and what He's shown us about Himself, come together in His Son, and are demonstrated most clearly in His death, burial and resurrection.

Even if you've not had that personal privilege, and someone else has been their "guide" for those initial stages, what a great foundation and reservoir of Truth you're now working with as you try to help and encourage them! They might be very new believers, but if their path to faith has involved getting to know God, themselves, Satan and eventually Jesus the Saviour through God's Narrative, then there will be many important areas of Truth you'll be able to confidently work from. Here are just a few general areas:

- In coming to know God as the sovereign, communicating Creator, the underlying pluralism in their respective worldviews has been seriously challenged and is being replaced with new worldview commitments and certainties.

- They've seen God always, without exception or contradiction, relate to everyone on the basis of His absolute righteousness and love.
- They know that God has specific purposes for human beings and that down through history He has revealed those purposes in His Word.
- In numerous and varied ways they've had God's Narrative challenge the deeply ingrained human assumption that they can *do* something to appease or please Him through their own efforts.

## Specific foundations for Chris and Emma

How about some specific areas of Truth you would be able to remind Chris and Emma about as they wrestle with issues of morality for themselves and their friends? From their initial introduction to God's Narrative they already know that:

- Having designed and created the first man, God then perfectly fulfilled Adam's need for close human companionship through the woman He created.
- Adam and Eve's special marriage relationship was vitally tied into God's purpose for his image-bearing race. Together, as man and wife, they were to relate to Him while overseeing His creation and populating the earth with other human God-worshippers.
- The capture and Fall of the human race by Satan's deceit was integrally tied into their failure as a husband/wife couple to humbly seek God's guidance. All human relationships, and most importantly the marriage and family ones, have ever since been confused, and much of the tragedy facing the human race can be traced to this.
- It's clear from God's Law that His standards for morality are absolute and therefore impossible for humans in their own strength to fulfill.
- Jesus Christ is the only One who has fulfilled God's perfect Law in every dimension and related to God the Father in the way He intends for humans.
- Having put their faith in Jesus, Chris and Emma's relationship with God has been restored. They now have a wonderful opportunity to align their lives with the purpose that God originally intended for Adam and Eve.
- Their friends, 'straight' or 'gay', just like everyone else who's not saved, are under God's judgment and equally in desperate need of Him to save them.

## Specific foundations for Mulu

What if it was Mulu who'd come to you for help in his difficult dilemma with the sacrifices? If, in the process of coming to know Jesus Christ as His Saviour, he also had the chance to hear the broad sweep of God's Narrative, what specific foundations of Truth would now be accessible to him? He already knows that:

- Satan has skillfully deceived all human groups and communities under his dominion to keep them from knowing and believing God.
- One of Satan’s favourite strategies is to encourage people to trust in and worship some replacement for the true God.
- God’s perfect Law demands that humans must always, under every circumstance, worship God with every part of their being.
- Only Jesus Christ has proved able to give God the place that He deserves.
- When Mulu put his faith in Jesus he was taken by God out of Satan’s control and placed in God’s family. This position of safety is permanent because it has nothing to do with Mulu’s own actions; it is entirely dependent on the righteousness of Jesus.
- This does not mean that Mulu will face no problems in this world. Beginning with Cain, many people who are trusting in something other than God’s provision have been used by Satan to oppose God’s people.
- Jesus showed love to His own community but He would not bow to pressure to be involved in things He knew would detract from God’s message. He was persecuted for His stance.
- Jesus has given us His Spirit and has promised that He will be with us at all times no matter what difficulties we face as His people in this world.

Even though for the purpose of this illustration, Chris and Emma and Mulu are so far only familiar with the highlights from the Old Testament and the Gospels, this amount of Truth has already provided a great basis for them to see the Bible as one body of Truth that is totally relevant to their current circumstances. The things God has revealed about Himself, about them and all humans, about Satan and then about the Lord Jesus Christ, give them a solid basis for knowing God’s perspective about their current circumstances and dilemmas. They do not have to wonder if they are misunderstanding a particular fragment of the Bible or whether it is being presented from some prejudiced perspective. The Truth they can apply here and now is built solidly on what God has shown them clearly through His Narrative. Of course He wants to continue to build on those foundations of Truth already in place and see them mature further as His children, and this will happen best if they continue to engage with God’s Word in the same way rather than engaging with fragments that are extracted from their real-life Narrative context.

This topic of how people can confidently interpret and apply the Bible to their lives deserves a lot more consideration than we’ve been able to give it in this one tutorial. But before we finish, let’s briefly note two more things.

## **Christ as interpretive key**

The W.I.L.D. question in focus talks about Jesus Christ being the “interpretive key” through whom we arrive at correct understandings of God’s Word. There

is a wealth of writing about this topic that can help us gain further insights into Jesus Christ's central place in interpretation or *hermeneutics* and we'd do well to access some of what's written by reliable writers. Although we've not had the space here to even begin exploring that area specifically, it's worth noting that this did emerge as we were picturing the truth-foundations that we'd be able to draw from if Chris and Emma and Mulu had engaged with Truth initially as one complete Christ-focused Narrative. As the central figure of history and as the One who is at the heart of the Narrative - He makes sense of it all.

## Interpreting God's Narrative as a group

The second point is this: as we've briefly delved into this fourth W.I.L.D. question, we've focused on individuals learning to interpret and apply God's Word as He intends. Although it is obviously important for each person to be equipped to correctly interpret what they hear, read and experience, the reality is that God does not intend for His children to engage with His Word as isolated individuals. To re-visit our scenarios one last time: imagine how much better it would be for Chris and Emma if they were wrestling with their different moral questions with other believers who were also being equipped to apply God's Narrative Truth consistently in their lives. Or how much encouragement Mulu would get in facing the disapproval and possible rejection of his village if he was part of a group who shared the same Truth foundations and relationship with Jesus Christ as he does.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the fourth question under *Word*, 'Are they growing in their ability to correctly understand God's Word as His complete Narrative, with Jesus Christ as the heart of the story and its interpretive key?', we can also ask:

- *Has their initial engagement with Truth introduced them to God as Creator and Lord, to Satan as Enemy, to humanity as God's completely lost race of image-bearers, and to Jesus Christ as Saviour?*
- *Do they understand the Biblical Narrative as God's revelation to real people, living in real times and places, and are new areas of truth being tied in historically and thematically with what they've already understood?*
- *Are they being integrated into a group of disciples where they are being helped to interpret and apply God's Word appropriately to their everyday experiences?*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

*The complete Narrative*

1. Can you think of an example from your own experience that illustrates someone - either yourself or someone else - facing one of the big questions or dilemmas in life and applying God's Word to it in order to find understanding or comfort?
2. What do you think is the cultural foundation (the culture of the people in the world around you) for solving the big questions or dilemmas that life brings? Do people typically apply logic, are they mystical, do they search for answers in a cohesive overarching story or are they happy to accommodate mutually contradictory concepts?
3. How does a cohesive view of the Biblical Narrative illustrate a person's understanding of God's character?