



Six Themes
Everyone Should Know

The Bible

Barry Ensign-George

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Press

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Six Themes Everyone Should Know series

The Bible, by Barry Ensign-George

Genesis, by W. Eugene March

Matthew, by James E. Davison

Luke, by John T. Carroll

1 and 2 Timothy, by Thomas G. Long

Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

Six Themes Everyone Should Know consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

Introduction to *The Bible*

This first study in the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series takes a wide-angle look at the Bible rather than focusing on a specific biblical book as the other studies do. Here the great arc of God’s mission is traced “From the Garden to the Garden City.” Barry Ensign-George looks at six themes that begin in the early chapters of Genesis, span the pages of Scripture, and end with the glorious vision of the book of Revelation—of the new Jerusalem, the city of the redeemed of God.

This study is important for discussing basic biblical frameworks. Within Scripture, echoes of early themes are picked up and heard, leading to deeper appreciations of the biblical message.

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies introduce major themes found in biblical books. These themes will be explored in themselves, for their values in the life of faith, and what they direct us toward in terms of the church’s life and action in the world. To see these themes in relation to the backdrops offered in *Six Themes in the Bible Everyone Should Know* will enliven these biblical studies with wider perspectives for deeper understandings and personal appropriation.

We are pleased to present this introduction and to welcome you to *Six Themes in The Bible Everyone Should Know*.

Preface

When we study the Bible we usually find ourselves focusing on small units of the whole: a single book, a specific chapter, or a few verses. We dive deep, seeking to understand and to learn these smaller units, looking for what they have to teach us. This is a good way to approach Scripture, and it has significant rewards.

Less often do we consider the sweep of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Some are inclined to claim that there is no grand sweep—only the smaller units matter. But the Bible is constructed more carefully than that. It is put together in ways that are complex, yes, but not random.

This study invites you to consider the grand sweep. The chapters of this study will look at six themes that are launched in Genesis 1–11 and then thread across the Bible, in most cases finding their final landing point in Revelation.

The grand sweep of the Bible could be explored by beginning from other starting points. Chapter 6 explores one of them: it considers Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John, who was, the Gospel tells us, there “In the beginning . . .” (John 1:1) and who goes ahead to God’s presence where “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” (John 14:2). One could start in other places as well, illuminating the grand sweep of the Bible along other lines. My hope for these six chapters is that the ideas explored here will be valuable in helping you make your own explorations of Scripture.

These studies are offered in part as helpers. I hope you will find them to be helpful in finding still other aspects of Scripture over its long stretch. That has been my experience over the last several years as I have worked with the material that makes up the content of the studies. I would read or hear someone’s insight into Genesis chapters 1–11, or an insight into Revelation’s account of the new Jerusalem, and suddenly I would begin hearing resonances, unexpected echoes of that insight in other places in Scripture. Or, to use a slightly different image, an insight that I read or heard would begin to illuminate other parts of Scripture in ways that I had never seen before. I would find connections being made where I hadn’t

seen them before nor anticipated them. I hope that you will have similar experiences as you work through these studies.

I am grateful to those whose insights have set off resonances for me. The footnotes in the study are a small way of saying a partial “thank you!” But there have been others along the way to whom I am deeply grateful. Among them are the members of the North-Central group of the Pastor-Theologian program of the Center of Theological Inquiry, the Exploring the Faith Class at Anchorage Presbyterian Church, Duane Hix, my colleagues in the Office of Theology and Worship, friends who have been part of the Core Cluster of the Re-Forming Ministry Program, and many others.

Barry Ensign-George

*The Garden of Eden, at the Bible's beginning, is also
in its end, the new Jerusalem.*

Chapter 1

The Great Arc of Creation: From Garden to Garden City

Scripture

Genesis 2:4–15 God's work of creation begins, making a place for first communion with God and others.

Revelation 21:9–14; 22:1–5 God's work of creation will come to its goal where there will be full communion with God and others.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, source of life, as we turn to your word draw us deeper into communion with you, that we might be more fully in communion with all those who love and follow you. Empower us to be effective and faithful agents of your work to gather all into the future full communion with you and one another. This we ask in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

This chapter is our first step in recognizing themes that stretch across the Bible. There are themes running across Scripture because the books of the Bible have a common set of primary characters: God, and the creation that God engages. The aim of this chapter and the five that follow is to recognize the larger thematic and narrative architecture of the Bible. This larger architecture is the work of editors who collected and shaped the writings that were gathered together and ordered in the canon of Scripture.

The stories of the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible, and of the new Jerusalem at the end are both ways of thinking about and exploring reality. They are a bit like Jesus' parables. The stories of Eden and new Jerusalem explore what reality is, focusing on the relationship of God to us and the reality in which we live. They invite us to think about reality in and through stories. The chapters of this study seek to guide us in thinking about reality, about our world and the cosmos through the story and stories the Bible tells, a particular way the Bible thinks about our world and about life.

This chapter focuses on the connection between the beginning and ending of the Bible; between the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the book of Genesis and the garden city, the new Jerusalem at the end of the book of Revelation. The two are deeply connected, and in that connection, there is a rich theology. The connection is rooted in God's good purposes, the mission of God that shapes the movement from beginning to end. The connection offers us assurance that God knows, loves, and values us and all creatures around us. Life is not merely random, but God has a purpose, and we are invited to be agents of God's purpose—as individuals and as the church.

A Basic Theme: The Garden of Eden and the Garden City

“In my beginning is my end,” poet T.S. Eliot wrote, concluding the poem with “In my end is my beginning.”¹ Eliot's insight is deeply biblical. The Garden of Eden, at the Bible's beginning, is also in its end, the new Jerusalem. Elements of Scripture's end are there already in the beginning, the Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Eden is present in the new Jerusalem in two particularly important features: tree and water.

There are many trees in Eden, “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” (It's interesting that beauty comes first. Humans do not live by fruit alone!) “In the midst” of the garden are two special trees: the tree of life, and the fateful tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9). Here, at the beginning of creation's story, the fruit of these special trees is dangerous, with effects the two humans cannot envision. The tree of life is growing in the middle

1. T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1974), 196–204.

of the new Jerusalem as well, but now its fruit produces fullness of life: “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit” (Revelation 22:2b).

There is flowing water in both places. Genesis 2:10–14 tells of a river flowing out of the garden, then dividing into four great rivers: the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. The latter two are well known. The former two are obscure. That obscurity serves to make the point. The list of rivers and regions is meant to suggest the world: the world is irrigated by the life-giving waters that flow out of the Garden of Eden. The river that brings life to all is also there in the new Jerusalem: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city” (Revelation 22:1–2).

The tree and life-giving river dominate the new Jerusalem, making it very like the Garden of Eden—it is a garden city. There is an arc, a grand story line that runs from the garden to the garden city, set intentionally in place, framing Scripture.² Seeing this great arc can help us see other aspects of God at work as well.

First, one might ask: “If Eden is a paradise, then why not just stop there: great job done?” What is missing in the Garden of Eden? The answer is: us! The long arc that stretches from garden to garden city opens time and space for you, and me, and all those around us, time and space for us to share in God’s great good gift of life, and to join the great procession toward living fully in God’s presence.

Second, God is on a mission, and this is it: creating creatures to share the fullness of life with God and with one another. God’s mission is the creation of creatures fitted for communion with God and with one another. The first communion is in Eden, full communion is in the new Jerusalem.

The Life of Faith: Living from the Beginning, Toward the End
For Christians, all reality stretches between a beginning and a specific end, the two of them deeply, intentionally connected. This element of our faith has implications as we seek to live faithfully. The great arc of creation, filled by God’s mission of creating

2. So it makes perfect sense that the resurrection of Jesus Christ—the overcoming of death—happens at a tomb that is in a garden. See John 19:41–42.

creatures fitted for communion gives context for our lives, sets us in personal relationship with God, offers us the gift of communion, and gives us the privilege of taking part knowingly in God's great mission.

The great arc of creation gives context for our lives. The Christian faith places us and all creatures in the widest context. The cosmos is, for Christians, not simply a random, impersonal sequence of happenings, just one thing after another. Creation is a coherent whole, like a well-told story: it has a beginning and a conclusion. Everything in between has coherence because it has a place in the story line that runs from that definite beginning to that definite conclusion. Our lives have meaning in this story, meaning rooted in the great story that God is creating. This cosmic context enables us to navigate the present. It helps us recognize where and when we are now. It helps us sort out what in our present moment is of lasting importance, and what is not.

The great arc of creation sets us in personal relationship with God. The great arc from garden to garden city is intensely personal. In life, at the deepest level, we have to do with a personal being, not just with impersonal material processes. This much is said repeatedly in the earlier verses of Genesis: and God *said*, and God *saw*, and God *enjoyed* its goodness. In these verses God's delight in creation is clear. Equally clear in Scripture is creation's corresponding delight in God (Psalm 19:1–6, Psalm 148, Job 38:7). Across the Bible, God is present and engaged. This means that our reading and study of Scripture help us learn to recognize God's presence also in our lives.

The great arc of creation offers us the gift of communion. Our place and time are among God's gifts to us, placing us in the story of God's good purposes, the story of all created things. Here and now, we begin to experience the gift of communion with God and with other people. We do not see this gift with equal clarity at all times. Sometimes it is very hard to recognize this gift. There are moments when we can no longer see, or feel, the connections that link our lives to the great story of God's

mission. In such times, we look to others to see and feel it on our behalf, awaiting the day when our seeing and feeling will be restored.

The great arc of creation gives us the privilege of taking part knowingly in God's great mission. Faith gives us the privilege of enjoying communion with God, and with others. By faith we take part knowingly, personally with God in God's mission. God's mission is the creation of communion, and God seeks communion with us. We gather weekly for worship, we pray and read Scripture daily, to turn our attention to God, entering the communion God seeks with us.³

The Church: Story Telling, Story Living

The church is the bearer of a story, the best and most basic story. This is the story of the world, the story that runs from creation to consummation. The church is the community of followers of the central figure in the story, the triune God who came among us, as one of us, in Jesus Christ. This story helps us know when, and where, and who we are. We are in the time of God's mission, when God is creating creatures fitted for communion with God and one another, and we get to be agents of that mission. The church is called and equipped to tell this story, and to live even now the communion for which God made us.

God calls and empowers the church to tell this story in three specific ways: in proclamation, telling the story to all; in our life together; and in building communities in which communion happens now.

The church is given the good work of telling the great story of God's mission in words, proclaiming the great story of which we are a part, the story of our value to the God who loves all creatures. It happens in our worship, as we turn our attention to the one who is always present to us, but from whom we are often distracted. In worship, we deepen our knowledge of God and God's mission, and we practice speaking what we know as we sing together, as we pray together, as we respond to the Word proclaimed in Scripture and sermon, as we enact the story in sacraments. Having learned,

3. These themes are found across Scripture. See, for example, Exodus 6:7; Psalm 46:10; 139; Ezekiel 34:30; Luke 24:13–35; John 14–17; Ephesians 1:16–20; Revelation 21:3.

having practiced, we are sent into the world, equipped and refreshed to tell the story in our own words and actions.

We tell the story in our life together as we seek to be communities in which all come to communion with God, and thus with all those others whom God loves. Life together in congregations and denominations is often a matter of the mundane—how will we be organized, what procedures shall we follow, who will do which chores. Yet such matters make it possible for our life together to be a foretaste of the communion to which God invites us. The way we deal with one another in such matters will be a witness, and God asks us to make it a witness to the goodness of God, rather than our own failings and frustrations.

We tell the story in our engagement with the world around us, working to help communities locally and globally be places where God's communion can flourish. So, the church sends workers where help is needed—next door or far away. The church works to encourage public systems that strengthen those across cities, states, and nations who seek communities that embody God's good purpose. The church advocates for good policies and seeks to build relationships that strengthen life together in all places.

In proclamation, life together, and engaging our world, the church serves God's mission of building communities that foreshadow the full communion we will live in the new Jerusalem.

For Reflection and Action

1. What other places in Scripture have trees or gardens that remind you of the Garden of Eden and the garden city?

2. Consider the description of the Garden of Eden in the verses from Genesis 2, and the description of the new Jerusalem from Revelation 21 and 22. What common features are found in these two places?

3. How do you tell the story of the long arc of God's mission, from the Garden of Eden to the garden city, the new Jerusalem? Where have you encountered good tellings of that story?

4. In what ways is your congregation telling the story of God's mission?

5. How do you tell the story? Practice telling, in a simple, summary way, the great story of God's work of creation, from beginning to conclusion.



Group Gatherings

Eva Stimson

The Great Arc of Creation: From Garden to Garden City

Main Idea

A great narrative arc runs from the Garden of Eden to the garden city, the new Jerusalem. This is the arc of God's mission throughout creation: the creation of creatures fitted for communion with God and with one another.

Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “The Great Arc of Creation: From Garden to Garden City.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select questions and activities that you will use.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments for the next gathering.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.
- Review the gathering format: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

Gracious and loving God, source of life, as we turn to your word draw us deeper into communion with you, that we might be

more fully in communion with all those who love and follow you. Empower us to be effective and faithful agents of your work to gather all into the future full communion with you and one another. This we ask in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Revelation 21:9–14; 22:1–5 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Conversation

- Introduce chapter 1, “The Great Arc of Creation: From Garden to Garden City.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review “A Basic Theme: The Garden of Eden and the Garden City” (pp. 2–3). Share these key points:
 - a. The Garden of Eden is present in the new Jerusalem. Genesis 2 is echoed in Revelation 21 and 22.
 - b. The course of creation, from beginning to end, has direction and shape.
 - c. The arc of God’s mission throughout creation is the creation of creatures fitted for communion with God and with one another.
- Form two groups, with one making a list of the features of Eden (Genesis 2:4–15), and others making a list of the features of the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9–14; 22:1–5).

Compare the two lists. Consider other places in the Bible where features that are present in both passages are important: water that brings life, food provided by God, standing in the presence of God.

- Review “The Life of Faith: Living from the Beginning, Toward the End” (pp. 3–5). Ask:

What difference does the arc of God’s mission make for how we live out the faith?

What help does it provide?

- Review “The Church: Story Telling, Story Living” (pp. 5–6). Ask:

How can we communicate the strength and wholeness that comes from living life within the framework offered by the movement from Eden to the new Jerusalem?

Conclusion

As a group, practice telling, in a simple, summary way, the great story of God’s work of creation, from beginning to conclusion.

Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Amen.