

The Family project™



GLENN T. STANTON
AND LEON C. WIRTH

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY

HOW GOD'S DESIGN
REVEALS
HIS BEST FOR YOU

“When you look at a family, you’re looking at a God-designed picture of the gospel. This has profound implications for the church and for society. *The Family Project* explores the theology of the family in an informative and accessible manner. I highly recommend it!”

—DR. RUSSELL D. MOORE
President, Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious
Liberty Commission

“If you only read the papers, you’d think that ‘family’ was a plastic idea, to be bent and reshaped as the whims of contemporary culture demand. But in reality, the idea of family predates just about everything: democracy, the nation-state—even history itself. In fact, the only thing to predate the family is the Almighty. *The Family Project* is a reader-friendly, theological explanation of why you can’t understand family without God. And vice versa.”

—JONATHAN V. LAST
Author, *What to Expect When No One’s Expecting*

“After decades of emphasis on radical individualism we have come, not to freedom, but to an unspoken epidemic of loneliness. *The Family Project* traces the way homeward with intelligence, honesty, and depth.”

—FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN
Author, *The Jesus Prayer*

“The bigger problem might be not that the family is under attack, as we often say, but that the family is just not understood. Glenn Stanton and Leon Wirth have done us all a tremendous service with

this clear, cogent, and thoughtful explanation of what the family is and why it is central to God's work in the world. This is stuff that too many Christians just don't know, but hopefully will because of this book."

—JOHN STONESTREET

Speaker and Fellow, the Chuck Colson Center
for Christian Worldview
Senior Content Advisor, Summit Ministries

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Introduction

Births. Birthdays. Anniversaries. Love. Commitment. Abuse. Betrayal. Divorce. Death.

For all of us, most of our greatest joys—and deepest wounds—come from our family experiences. We all know that our own families matter, but can you explain to someone why family in general matters at all these days?

- To the weary single mom trying to keep her head above water—why does family matter?
- To the pastor struggling to keep his own marriage and family healthy while counseling deeply needy and hurting souls in his congregation—why does family matter?
- To the teen who wishes she could get away from her suffocating parents so she can be free to explore what the world offers—why does family matter?
- To the young man living in his parents' home, working nearly full-time to conquer new levels of the latest first-person-shooter video game—why does family matter?
- To the troubled Christian couple who carries more questions than answers about the marriage, its struggles, and the future—why does family matter?
- To the spouse wrestling with a text message or social media nudge from that old flame, wondering what harm could

come from it, feeling limited in life by the duties that come from family—why does family matter?

- To the young adult who wants marriage and kids but is afraid of doing it poorly or messing it up because all she has are unhealthy examples from her parents—why does family matter?
- To the family that seems to be doing pretty well in general—why does family matter?

We believe that many of the views held by many of us today regarding family, either as an ideal or in the practice of our everyday lives, have become weak and shallow. Conventional wisdom in many Christian and social circles has reduced family to either a culture-war landmine or merely a private, personal relationship.

We invite you to join us on a bold journey of rediscovery of some ancient truths about what family is in light of who God is, what He created us to be, and His unfolding story through history—*History*.

You see, God is revealing Himself—His character, His nature, His love, His grace, and His holiness—to the world. He has been doing that since He first created mankind, and He continues it today.

And God has been doing so in remarkably glorious and mysterious ways through family.

We will be moving through some very important environs that will probably be new to many readers. But they are not new. Many of the paths we will be taking are ancient roads that were well known and widely used a thousand or more years ago. Our rediscovery—and hopefully re-appreciation—of them will help us see and understand God, ourselves, our families, and hopefully the whole of our lives a bit differently than we do today. Christianity, as a 2,000-plus-year-old faith, has a rich storehouse of wisdom and insight into what God has taught and is teaching us through His

Word, given to us by faithful believers and leaders down through the ages. We will be guided along our journey by many of their insights and teachings.

As any important trip begins, it makes things more enjoyable and beneficial when the travelers go over the plan, direction, and highlights of the expedition ahead of them:

Where will we be going?

How will we get there?

What will we be seeing along the way?

Why are these particular points of interest worth paying attention to?

Such pre-excursion activities are exciting because they help us anticipate the trip, imagining what the actual experience itself will be like. This is what we will be doing in this introduction.

We hope it will serve to enrich your expedition, allowing you to see the larger meaning of high points such as weddings, births, baptisms, graduations, holidays together, vacations, etc. But the principles are also equally true in what we might see as the mundaneness of family life: preparing meals together, doing homework, washing clothes, disciplining, bathing the children, cleaning out the garage, grocery shopping, fixing the broken window in the bathroom, changing flat tires, etc. So much of your family's life is more divine than you might imagine.

Unfortunately, there is a troubling dearth of theologies¹ of family and humanity that help us gain a vivid, practical, and colorful picture of what lies ahead and to view it all in a more meaningful way. We hope to help overcome this problem with the materials presented in the following pages.

This is a very important perspective, for it bridges the gap between the technicality of classroom theology and the “tips and techniques” of self-help books. This project—both in this book and the

DVD curriculum, which is also available—cuts a middle way, painting a moving and meaningful picture of the story that God has been telling, and His invitation to all of us to participate in it with Him. And you will see how important the nature of marriage and family are to this divine story.² In many important ways, the human family is not just a special interest, some moral topic to fight over in the culture war, but a primary, ongoing narrative of God's story. And if we don't understand it this way, we cannot truly understand God's nature and His purposes and actions through history. That is a bold statement, but based on our long study of this topic we believe it is supported by a faithful examination of the Scriptures. See if you agree.

The tools we use and the trails we will go down are all founded on the truth of God's revealed word to us through the Holy Scriptures. But this will not be merely a study of lots of individual verses; for the Scriptures are not merely a collection of individual, quotable passages, but a story—God's story to us, from beginning to end. Seeking to be faithful to this narrative nature of God's Word, it will have a very strong cohering thread moving through it that connects these verses, stories, and instances that Scripture provides for us. And this thread moves through Scripture from the first verse to the last, as we will see. (Relax, though. We are not going to go through every verse!) It is more of a story than the typical sort of study you might be used to. But we will also see how these biblical truths are found and even revealed in

- the nature of our collective humanity—our deepest and most aching longings, universally felt among all people the earth over as well as throughout history;
- the way we live together in culture, despite all the unique differences we observe across the remarkably distinct societies around the globe;

- the investigations of philosophy and human psychology;
- the arts: painting, literature, poetry, and music;
- the surprising and sophisticated developments in today's cutting-edge sciences; and finally,
- the day-to-day ins-and-outs of both our interior lives—the deepest, most private crevices of our hearts and souls—and our exterior lives, the ways we live, relate to, and interact with those around us.

And we explore all of this unapologetically from the center of all reality: God and His character, nature, and essence, as well as His desire and purpose for us. Only in understanding who God is and what He is up to in the world can we understand ourselves, each other, and the connections between us.

AN IMPORTANT INTERSECTION

Now we will be orienting ourselves from time to time on our trip by the intersections of two main thoroughfares. As in most cities, there are main roads by which we orient ourselves to all others places in the city. In our city of Colorado Springs, those roads are Union and Academy Boulevards. If asked, most people in your city could name yours and find widespread agreement. So the following are ours for navigational purposes.

Our East-West Pathway: Fuller Worldview Boulevard

This first byway is a larger Christian worldview, providing the full canvas upon which we will be drawing our picture of God's story from its beginning to its culmination.

Typically, Christians have understood the historical progress of a Christian worldview as a three-act play involving God and man. These are:

1. *Creation*
2. *Fall*
3. *Redemption*

Of course, these represent:

1. God's *creation* of the physical universe and humanity as male and female, made to serve as God's distinct and unique physical image-bearers in the world.
2. Man's *Fall*, where both male and female allowed themselves to be deceived by Satan and chose to go their own way, disobeying the one divine prohibition that God had given them. This rebellion severely devastated all of humanity, threatening to separate us forever from God.
3. *Redemption* is God's work to bring man back into right relationship with God through His boundless love for us, demonstrated through the giving of His Son for our sin. Because of this, our separation from God does not have to be forever.

Each of these is a key part of a Christian worldview, but there are more that cannot be overlooked as fundamental parts of the story as well. A full Christian worldview consists of four additional parts that not only add necessary things to the story but enrich our understanding of the story itself in important ways. A fuller worldview is understood collectively as follows:



Here are the four added acts:

1. *Pre-creation*: While the start of creation is explained in Genesis 1:1, we are told of pre-creation in John 1 and numerous other places in the New Testament—as we will see later on. This part of our faith's worldview tells us what was there before there was any-

thing else. Actually, this is the starting point for the story that takes Christ as the center of it, isn't it? Read John 1:1-3 and 14. It tells us that Christ, the Word, existed before there was anything else, and He dwelt from eternity with the Father. We don't understand Christ if we don't understand this. And we cannot understand Christianity if we do not understand Christ. Have you ever thought about the significance of this? Most of us don't. But understanding and appreciating the nature of pre-creation will give you a much richer and truer view of the rest of God's story, for it sets the stage for everything else, as we shall see.

2. *Incarnation* is also an indispensable and dramatically game-changing part of the divine story. It is also connected to pre-creation as we read in John 1:14. God took on flesh and "dwelt among us," fully God and fully man. And it is not just crucial *that* He did, but also *how* He did. It is honestly impossible to overstate the significance of this as we will discover in our journey ahead. While incarnation initiates our Father's glorious redemption of the world from sin and death, it also speaks to the nature and relationship between heaven and Earth, the spiritual and the physical. It really brings these two together.

3. *Ascension* is perhaps the least appreciated part of this larger way of understanding a Christian worldview, for its importance is more subtle. We will not let the cat out of the bag here, because it is pivotal to critical points that will come up in later chapters. But it illuminates in significant ways the nature of both the spirituality of the physical body and the nature of fatherhood and sonship.

4. *Consummation*, as the name implies, is the conclusion of God's drama. It is what the whole story has been moving toward, and therefore speaks of God's purposes in our history and sets the stage for eternity. It tells us absolutely profound things about God's own nature and His eternal desire, so much so that we'll come to

wonder how we understood and appreciated God's movement in history without it.

A fuller Christian worldview is critical because it illuminates the fuller Christian story.

Our North-South Pathway: Definitive Statement Avenue

This second main street that will guide us to our destination recognizes four remarkable statements from God's own mouth that give meaning and understanding to everything else we might ever know or understand about what it means to be human. We refer to them throughout as God's *Four Definitive Statements*, for they establish fundamental truths in God's story.

The first three are the first statements God makes about the first two humans. As such, they are the most profound, consequential descriptions of what humanity is and what it means to be human in light of who God is. The fourth tells us how the story ends . . . or actually begins again.

Two are very good news, and two are very bad. The bad-news statements are sandwiched in between the two good-news statements. The first three appear in the first three chapters of the Bible. And they change everything. The fourth is *very* good news and speaks to humanity's only hope—and appears in the next-to-the-last chapter of Scripture. And all the rest of God's story is book-ended, if you will, by these defining statements.

So we should know about them and understand carefully what they are and what they mean before we begin our journey into understanding how family shows us the very image and nature of God Himself.

God's *First Definitive Statement* comes from the mouth of God as He's creating all that is. He's bringing into being the wonderful physical world and then comes to a place where He announces that

He will create something unique and special that stands in stark contrast to all the rest of creation. God says,

“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)

This is the declaration from God about what we as humans were created to be and what we do: physically reflect and show forth the image of the invisible God in the world. And humanity does this in both male and female. As we will unpack throughout this book, a great gift to us from God is knowing who we are and what is unique about us, as well as understanding why we were created as we are.

While the first verse tells us who we are and what our purpose is, God’s *Second Definitive Statement* tells us something very important about ourselves as well. Collectively, these are unarguably the two most definitive statements about being human in all the literature that man possesses. In explaining humanity’s most fundamental problem, the second statement reveals something about us because it points to something important about God:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” (2:18)

In creation there is something that is not good, though God created it all. He does not make mistakes. He is incapable of it. This second telling of humanity’s creation in Genesis 2 goes into more detail regarding our creation, explaining that Adam was created first. But God proclaims that Adam’s solitude is not good for him. Adam is not as he was meant to be. Aloneness is neither natural nor good for anyone; it is not part of our divine makeup. It is man’s

original problem. And so God makes a partner for him, as we will see in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this book. In a very weighty statement about what it means to be female, God tells us that she is the answer to mankind's original and most significant problem.

God's *Third Definitive Statement* speaks to what most would typically think of as mankind's first problem. While his isolation is the first problem, this third statement from God indicates man's greater problem because of its devastating consequences:

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil." (3:22)

Adam and Eve, by their own God-given free will, chose to disobey God's clearly given command—the only one given—and usher in the curse of sin and death upon themselves and all of humanity. As we know, this changed the whole game, setting the story on a whole different path. The rest of the story is about what God does to allow us to overcome this first and most grave mistake, which leads us to God's *Fourth Definitive Statement*.

God tells us in the last book of our Bibles what this whole story is finally pointing toward, what He is up to. It is glorious and profound:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. . . ."

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done.” (Revelation 21:2-6)

God will dwell with us, and we shall be His people. He will attend to our tears and pain, and He will end the death brought on by the original sin of Adam and Eve. He is “making all things new.”

So these Four Definitive Statements are perhaps the most important statements in all of human telling and literature about what it means to be human, what we are, and where we are going—for they are far and away the most consequential, are they not? We will unpack the reality of these statements throughout the coming pages—in conjunction with understanding these additional critical parts of a complete and biblical worldview—because without a special appreciation of and focus on both of these intersecting roads, we cannot grasp the fullness of the larger story that God lives in and has been telling us.

So there we go. These are the basics of what each of us needs to know as we prepare for our investigative journey. So cancel the mail and the newspaper, have your neighbor Edna come feed the dog and cat, excuse the kids from school, get their make-up work, change the oil in the family car, and check the tires. We have a most excellent adventure to embark upon. Saddle up.

Note: Throughout this book, you'll see sidebars listing Internet locations where classical paintings referred to in the text may be viewed. Please note that some of these images, such as depictions of Adam and Eve, contain nudity. Certain other images, including those depicting the Crucifixion, may be disturbing to some.



Part I

WHERE OUR STORY BEGINS

We want to know and understand what families are in a much larger way—in light of who God is in His larger essence and then what *we* are in light of this. These two—a biblical theology and anthropology—will merge together in a creative and true way, helping us appreciate what is taking place when families are formed and seek to live out the day-in, day-out routines of life together.

On our trek we will learn that family is so much larger, grander, and more mysterious than most of us have ever imagined. Most books that address the question of family in terms of biblical truth are either technical systematic theologies or advice books on how to solve family problems or improve general family life. This book is different. It seeks to explain *why* and *how* our families and humanness matter—and, most importantly, do so in light of who God is.



Chapter

1

YOU ARE HERE

Davion Only was born in prison, spent years in and out of foster homes, and wanted a family—badly. He found his family of origin after learning the identity of his birth mother around the time that she died in June 2013. At her funeral, he discovered that he was loved by relatives that he didn't even know he had. But he still didn't have a family to call his own. So in September, the 15-year-old orphan took a rather bold step. He stood in front of a church congregation and asked for someone to adopt him.

“I'll take anyone,” he said.¹

That same year, Jackie Turner—a 26-year-old college student from an abusive home—put an ad on Craigslist, offering to pay a family to be hers for the holidays. She longed for the loving embrace of parents who cared about her and wouldn't hurt her. She was offering what little money she had: eight dollars per hour.

She told the media, “I've never felt the touch of my mom hugging me and holding me. I don't know what it's like to look in my dad's eyes and feel love instead of hatred.”²

Here we will explore what we all have in common with Davion, Jackie, and so many like them.

WHAT IS TRUE OF ALL PEOPLE?

There are lots of different kinds of people in the world. No, not those who like the beach and those who like the country, or those who like Thai food and those who can't stand it. We're not talking about "cat people" and "dog people," but about much deeper and meaningful differences.

Look around at all the human cultures across the globe and throughout history. Think about those you learned of in *National Geographic* magazine through the decades. Many of them are so very different from ours, to the point of being difficult for us to understand and nearly impossible to relate to. They would have the same reaction to us. No matter what culture you come from, you can always find one that is just perfectly weird to you. *How can they find that kind of food tasty? Why do they wear those kinds of clothes? Why do they pierce their bodies with those things? Why there? Why don't those people ever pierce their bodies? Why would they choose those kinds of homes to live in? Why do they do that kind of work or play those kinds of games? Why do they dress and carry their babies that way? Why don't they just do it the normal way—you know, like we do it?* Paul Simon, on his album *Surprise*, has a wonderful song titled "How Can You Live in the Northeast?" on this very topic.

There are many curious differences among humans, just as there are many similarities. It is part of what it means to be human. We can choose our own lives, how we want to live. But given all these dramatic differences, we are all human—and there are things that all humans do because either they enjoy them or *must* do them. Anthropologists call these "human universals." They are things we find in all human cultures regardless of a culture's age, geographical or historical location, politics, religion, or economy. They are universal.



***A Better Understanding:
Human Universals and Social Construction***

When thinking and speaking about the ways humans act and why, one will often hear that all human behaviors—save a very few basic bodily needs like eating, drinking, staying warm, waste elimination, etc.—are “socially constructed.” This is the theory, very popular among many academics and so-called progressives, that humans act as we do because our individual societies encourage, require, or shape such behaviors based on some need or power-play by that society’s leaders—most often the men. Thus, such behaviors are artificially constructed by social influence. Typically we hear that term in comments like, “Well, we all know that gender difference is a mere social construct.” Social construction theory assumes there is no universal human nature. This flies in the face of basic observation.

Marriage, parenthood, and siblinghood are all human universals, not socially constructed. They have been fundamental to human and social nature in all cultures since the beginning of time, through societies that have had no way of influencing one another due to geography, from the Agaw of Ethiopia to the Zapotec of Mexico. We address this social centrality of family more in Chapter 6.

Noted anthropologist Donald Brown³ has long studied and outlined the beliefs, qualities, traditions, and practices that are humanly universal. It is a fascinating topic of study. Some of these everyday universals are very curious things, like a desire for sweets, singing and dancing, enjoyment of jokes and humor, the need for daily routines,

the education of children, processes for cleanliness, gift-giving, thumb-sucking, playful tickling, rules of etiquette, gossip, customary greetings, use of hairstyles, etc. People in all cultures—and as far as we know, at all times—do each of these. Human universals.

For our journey in these pages, we must note that all humans universally have the following absolute needs, and these are each unique to humanity:

- *Question-asking.* No child needs to be taught to ask questions, as any parent knows. We have to be taught to keep our questions to a reasonable minimum or else parents go nuts. We are naturally questioning people. We wonder. We ponder. We ask. We seek. We always will.
- *Religious pursuit and practice.* People in all cultures naturally ask questions with religious meaning. We believe that there must be something over and in command of the world we live in. We are not inclined to accept ourselves as the ultimate part of reality. Atheism is not as natural.
- *Personal relationships.* People are fundamentally relational creatures. No one can become or live as a happy person without relationships. Brown calls this basic reality of all humans “triangular awareness”—the awareness of the self and at least two others one is in relationship with. Community is more than us and another person. We all must have others, a community. As we will see, people will fail to thrive physically and mentally without meaningful community and intimacy.
- *Sense of significance and meaningful work.* We must all feel as if we have some significance. This can come from our religious beliefs and understanding, our relationships, and our work. No person or society can become and remain healthy without meaningful work. We must have it to thrive, not just economically, but in every other way.

What is notable is that one can be impeccably cared for nutritionally and physically, but none of us in any time or culture can live in any measure of health and happiness without each of these four things in our lives. If we are deprived of them, very bad things happen. Examples in real human experience are as ample as they are sad.

In terms of question-asking and particularly queries of ultimate meaning, one unlikely and curious man asked three of the most important and fundamental questions that any of us can struggle with.

GAUGUIN'S QUESTIONS = EVERYONE'S QUESTIONS

The lonely artist had made up his mind. Today was the day he would end it all for good.

He climbed the dense, tropically wooded hill behind his Tahitian hut, more alone than he had ever been. He'd spent most of his life in loneliness—intentionally, some would say, for he seemed the only one who'd ever really mattered to him.

He took nothing with him on this short trip up the hill but his ever-pressing load of despair and a small tin of arsenic. His was a life of crushing debt, depression, emptiness, and debilitating disease, much of it the result of his world-class arrogance and unchecked sexual appetite. Desolation and failure would be his legacy.

Paul Gauguin had become a hopelessly pitiful man. He'd failed to achieve meaningful success as a painter in his lifetime. He'd abandoned his wife and children. He alienated every friend he ever had.

He'd headed to Tahiti in search of human purity, the authentic life untouched by the poisons of modernity, conventionality, greed, and power. He'd taken a "wife/servant" for himself in this paradise—a tall, dark-haired girl, perhaps 13 years old.

He subsisted on the rare and meager financial gifts that arrived

from the mainland, in answer to his many begging and bitter letters home. His children never wrote their father. His wife did so only rarely.

Now he had come to the end.

Just days before, he'd completed one last painting, intended as his final testament to the world. He'd described its philosophical ambition to a friend as "comparable to that of the gospel" without the slightest appreciation of this ridiculous overstatement.

It was a massive, three-panel work depicting Tahitian women of all life phases engaged in various everyday activities and inactivities. Moving from right to left, as he intended, it showed the beginning of life in an infant and the end of life in a sad, old woman—and various stages between.

GET THE PICTURE

Paul Gauguin, *Self-Portrait with Halo* (1889)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Visit familyproject.com to see this painting.

Painted as a decoration for the dining room of an inn where Gauguin lived with one of his art students, this piece was completed on a cupboard door. Art scholars debate whether Gauguin was portraying himself as Christ or Satan. Perhaps it was both—portrayed in part by the twin apples of enlightenment and temptation alongside the temple of the artist—the enticing artist-savior of all those around him, calling them to a life of illumination and insight beyond what he condemned as the confining strictures of religion and art of his day.

Yet the greatest meaning of the painting was not found in the images presented, but in the title. It captured three of the most searching questions any human can ponder, and they appear in the section of gold in the upper left-hand corner. In French, as Gauguin wrote them, they were as follows:

D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?

In English, they are:

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

And now, having finished his greatest work, Gauguin walked up the wooded hill and swallowed all the arsenic in the tin to make sure it accomplished its dark task. Finally he lay down, intending to sleep and never to awake in this life.

But even in this last act, the artist failed. He ingested too much arsenic, causing him to violently vomit the poison before it could take effect. He managed to find his way back down the hill—and to suffer a few more years of failure and emptiness. He would die at the early age of 54, his body appearing far older than it was, ravaged by alcohol abuse and syphilis.

So why are these particular questions significant, and what do they have to do with our exploration here? Let's look at them more closely.

1. *Where do we come from?* asks *What is the source of our being?*
2. *What are we?* wants to know *What is our nature? What are we made for?*
3. *Where are we going?* probes *What's our destiny? What is our existence and everything else moving toward?*

But curiously, these questions are not the brilliant insights of an artist freed from the stifling confines of traditional religion and Western society. Gauguin did not find them in the clarity of his atheism or in the “authentic” culture of Polynesia.

GET THE PICTURE

Paul Gauguin, *D'ou venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Ou allons-nous?* (1897)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Visit familyproject.com to see this painting.

This massive scape was completed on a large, three-part canvas of jute which Gauguin quickly cobbled together due to his material poverty. It is a beautiful piece of work, but offers no real answers to the nagging questions it poses in the yellow of the upper-left corner. It is curious that the scene consists of women in various activities and all stages of life, starting with birth at the right side leading to old age bordering on death at the left. And what of the two women coming from the cave, down the path toward the beginning-of-life side of this work? They are carrying a newborn child.

It cannot go without notice that the linear movement of human life from birth to death is book-ended by animal life with some kind of duck on the death side and a dog on the birth side. The only religious or spiritual hint in the piece is the curious pagan statue that the people seem to not only be ignoring but literally have their backs turned to. What is the meaning of this? A denunciation of empty pagan symbolism or religion as a whole? We are left to wonder. Does the lack of any clear answer to his questions mean that there are no answers to be had, or that Gauguin himself had none to offer? Or are the answers simply found in the beauty of the mundane everyday activities of life? If so, this meaning is apparently only found in the lives of women alone, for the painting features no males.

Even in his most brilliant moment, he was not original. Gauguin's questions came from someone who influenced him in the earlier years of his life, someone who knew why these questions were important to the human soul and what the right answers were. This someone drew from a much larger story than himself.

This man was Bishop Félix Antoine Philibert Dupanloup. Bishop Dupanloup was a brilliant intellectual, a member of the French Academy, and a respected and influential leader in the French church. He was a key advocate for the canonization of Joan of Arc, as well as a colorful and tireless Christian revivalist and a formational and distinguished educator of the young.

Gauguin studied under the charismatic bishop during most of his teen years at the Petit Séminaire, which Dupanloup founded in Orléans. Gauguin came under the influence of Dupanloup's catechism, with its repetitive contemplation of a variety of foundational questions regarding God, ourselves, others, and our collective existence. This system was driven by Dupanloup's conviction that once merged into the hearts and minds of the young boys, these questions—and their answers—would never be erased.

And they weren't, particularly in this one young student. No matter how far he roamed (or ran) ideologically, morally, or spiritually from God—no matter how he tried to shake his past—the passionate bishop's three questions, those he taught as more fundamental than all the others, could not leave the tormented and seemingly unyielding Gauguin.

They became the substance of his final testament.

ANSWERS

These questions plagued not only Gauguin but his whole generation—those before and those to come after, including our own. Can

you think of a more important set of three basic questions that any soul can ask? Have you never thought about them to some degree? Do you think they have never occurred, in some degree or another, to any other human with a moderate level of intelligence? You know they are natural to all of us.

The good news is that there are answers—true and beautiful answers—found in glorious places. They are found in an exceedingly profound and breathtaking story. And where it takes you and how it answers these questions will likely surprise you.

So we have set a number of key foundation stones as we travel in our investigation, adding two to the two we established in the introduction:

- Seven parts of a fuller Christian worldview, beginning with pre-creation and ending with consummation
- Four Definitive Statements
- Four key human universals
- Gauguin's three questions

Keep these in mind, well noted in your travelogue as we start.

THE DENARRATED LIFE: WHERE QUESTIONS GO TO DIE

Each one of us must know that our lives are part of something bigger than we are, that the various parts of our lives—our work, our faith, our family and friends, our community involvement, our education—connect to some meaningful degree. This connection is the narrative of our lives. Just as in a story, it is the thread that carries things along. There can be good, healthy narratives that fill our lives—one person's life being about educating young people with Down syndrome, or another's about providing healthcare for cancer patients. And there can be poorer, unhealthy narratives—like wanting to become super-famous, crazy rich, or just to get your next bottle of Scotch.

David Hart, a contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian, explains that we can know God in the way we do because “God is who He is because He has a story in which He acts.”⁴ Therefore, *we* must have a story to live in.

Famed moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, observed the essential nature of a storied context for each of us:

I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” . . . Deprive children [ourselves] of stories and you leave them [us] unscripted, anxious stutterers in their [our] actions as in their [our] words.⁵

James Bryan Smith, a sought-after director and author in spiritual development, explains the importance of narrative to our lives in God:

We are creatures who live by our stories. From early on, we are told stories by our parents, which help us interpret how life is or how life ought to be. We are naturally drawn to stories. . . . Narrative is the central function of the human mind. We turn everything into a story to make sense of life. . . . In fact, we cannot avoid it. We are storied creatures.⁶

Stories are a human universal but must be much more than tales we tell. Your story is that which ties your life together and gives it a cohering meaning. Douglas Coupland, one of the brightest contemporary novelists, observes and writes on the ways the last two generations—Xers and Millennials—see their place in the world. He inadvertently coined the term “Generation X” with his first novel by that name.

In his book of essays, *Polaroids from the Dead*, Coupland says that a primary disease of our age is the loss of stories, and as such, very bad things happen to us. We start to feel “lost, dangerous, out of control and susceptible to the forces of randomness,” he says.

Sound like anything you observe today around you? Perhaps even within you?

This loss is where we lose the sense of our own lives, the feeling of belonging to something bigger, more meaningful, and more transcendent than ourselves. Just as basic as food and water are for our physical bodies, living within a life narrative is essential for our hearts' or souls' existence.

Coupland perceptively laments that it's now “possible to be alive, yet have no religion, no family connections, no ideology, no sense of class location, no politics and no sense of history. Denarrated.”⁷ Being “denarrated” is the bigger part of what we might call “not having a life.”

The larger story which we live in and by should be worth living for and living out of. In fact, it should really be worth dying for. If it's not worth dying for, is it really worth living for?

So, we must ask: What are our stories today? What is it that gives our lives a sense of narrative, a greater backdrop of meaning to live against? And then is that story worth having? To be frank, is it worthy of you?

Consumerism, professional success, fashion and popular culture, sports, video games, social media, and entertainment are inadequate narratives for human beings. We are made for grander things. For too many of us, though, the narrative of our lives is work, school, trying to get to that next level. Our big life goal seems to be nothing more than making it through one more day, one more week with the kids' school, with the wash, with the bills, with work projects.

Each of these things is fine in itself, and even necessary. But all

should be parts of our lives, not life itself. The great Southern writer Flannery O'Connor said, "It requires considerable courage at any time, in any country, not to turn away from the storyteller."⁸ We are and have been moving away from the storyteller and therefore the story as well, perhaps precisely because we have lost our courage.

As Coupland said, if we cannot locate ourselves in a story much bigger than ourselves, we are lost.

Lost in meaning.

Lost in purpose.

Lost in motivation.

Lost in significance.

L-O-S-T.

So what is an appropriate narrative?

THE UNIQUE FULLNESS OF A CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE

It is our conviction that Christianity has the biggest, truest, fullest, and most compelling narrative for answering Gauguin's three questions. This book is an explanation of why and how this is, and does so through studying family. We will learn not just about how important family is but primarily how profound the Christian faith and God are.

Because, as you hopefully have seen, we are—every one of us—a Davion or a Jackie, searching for relationship, for meaning, for answers to questions that are found beyond ourselves.

THE BIG STATEMENT FOR REFLECTION

There is a universal human nature that is common to all people at all times in history. We are naturally born to be curious about the "big questions" of life. Each of us requires both intimacy and acceptance

from others and a sense of significance about our lives, work, and place in the world. And we long to find meaning to our story, yearning to be part of a larger one.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Many—Christians and non-believers—see Christianity as essentially a belief system that explains where we go when we die, and how to be good until we get there. Do you think Christianity is bigger or wider than that? In what ways? Why does this larger, fuller view matter?
2. Do you see individuals today as increasingly *denarrated*? How is that true of those around you at work, at school, in your family and neighborhood, and even in your church? Does this really matter?
3. What larger narratives did people have 100 years back and earlier? How did the following contribute to the narratives people inhabited?
 - Where they lived
 - How they supported themselves and their families
 - What they believed about ultimate realityDid farmers, for instance, live in a different narrative than city dwellers?
4. Consider our four fundamental human universals. What does it mean that people can be provided with adequate food, physical protection, and care, but if they don't experience intimacy and love and important work to do, they cannot thrive as human beings—even dying from such absences? Why do you suppose this is?