

I've mentioned to you before that Pam and I used to be foster parents. Not long after we got three little girls to foster, we thought it would be a good idea to have a swing-set in the backyard for them to play on. I checked several places where swing-sets were sold, and finally found the one I wanted. It had everything – swings, rings, a ladder, a slide, a couple of other swings so that all of them could play on the swing set at the same time.

Obviously, it was unassembled. But you can't believe how "unassembled" it was! There was an incredible number of parts – large bars, small bars, brackets, braces, chains, bolts, and nuts and washers. Included with this smorgasbord of parts was an instruction booklet, which I figured I didn't really need. But after working with it for a while, assembling and disassembling some parts of it, and I finally gave in and began to follow the instruction book.

I would have had it put together much sooner, except for the HELP I received during the assembly process. I had three little girls watching my every move. *"Mr. Gary, are you almost through?" "Can we get on it now?" "Mr. Gary, why is it taking so long?"*

Several hours into the project, I had finally gotten to the bottom of the box and I noticed a bright fluorescent orange card with large black print that must have been put in the box by someone with a sense of humor. I picked up the card and looked at it. It read: *"When All Else Fails, Read the Instructions!"* That must have been addressed to all of us macho men who don't ask for directions when we are driving, and don't read the instruction manuals, either.

You know, life is like that. It's hard to put it all together when we fail to read the

instructions. That's why the BIBLE is so important for us. It's our instruction manual. IT HAS STRAIGHT FORWARD, PROFOUND, AND PRACTICAL ADVICE. It has the answers we long for and the solutions we need to make life work.

Now, I am not suggesting that we can master the Bible in five minutes or in three easy steps. But what I am saying is that if we are going to discover the great truths of the Scriptures, then we need to read and study the Bible.

There is an old saying that proclaims: *"I could get this mattress up the stairs if I could just figure out how to get hold of it!"* That is true with the Bible. There are certain handles that enable us to get hold of it – or better put, cause it to get hold of us! This morning, I want to suggest four of these "handles." These four words, which all begin with the letter "C," serve as a helpful outline for the Bible and its amazing drama of redemption. I'm indebted to Dr. James Moore who suggested this outline. Here they are: *CREATION, COVENANT, CHRIST, CHURCH*. Let's take a look at these one at a time.

FIRST, THERE IS CREATION. The very first words of the Bible say it: *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."* God created the world intentionally, purposefully, orderly, systematically. God created the world out of love and for love, and when it was finished, God looked at it and said, *"This is very good!"* No Big-Bang theory here. To me, calling the creation of the world a cosmic accident is about as ridiculous as saying that *Webster's Dictionary* is the result of a print-shop explosion.

The old argument still appeals to me, the argument in which we are asked to imagine a man crossing a field. The man sees a watch lying on the ground. He has never seen a watch before and he's not sure what it is. He picks up the watch and examines it. He finds that it is composed of a metal case and a porcelain dial. He opens it and inside he finds a

complicated, but orderly arrangement of springs and wheels and levers and jewels, all ticking away systematically. He looks at the hands on the dial, and sees that they are moving in a predetermined order.

Now, what does he make of this? Does he say, *“Well, I suppose that all these springs, and wheels, and levers, and jewels just came together by chance from the ends of the earth and made themselves into a watch and wound themselves up?”* No.

If he has any powers of reasoning at all, he is bound to say, *“I have found a watch. Somewhere there must be a watchmaker.”*

So, in like manner, when we find a universe that has an order more accurate than any watch, it is only natural to say, *“I have found a world. Somewhere there must be a world maker.”* The Bible tells us in its first sentence (and on through the rest of its pages) that there is indeed A WORLD MAKER . . . and it is none other than God. God is the Creator, the Ruler of all things, the Lord of all life. This is the first great theme of the *Bible* — *Creation*.

SECOND, THERE IS COVENANT. What is a covenant? The simple definition is that a covenant is a contract, a binding agreement, a pledge, a promise. The biblical covenant is the binding agreement God makes with us as he made with Abraham: *“I will be your God and you shall be my people.”* To understand the covenant better, we need to put in two extra words. God says, *“I will be your ONLY God (no other Gods), and you shall be my SERVANT people (not privileged people, not holier-than-thou people, but servant people).”*

In the covenant, God calls us to be servant people, a light to the nations. As the Old Testament puts it, *“We are blessed to be a blessing.”* In the Creation story, we see the dependable natural laws (like the law of gravity) introduced into the world, woven into the fabric of the universe.

Here in the COVENANT, we see the dependable spiritual laws introduced into the world. We have learned from experience that life works best for us when we honor and respect the natural laws of the universe. For instance, I know it would not be wise for me to climb to the top of the church steeple and jump off. It would not be prudent for me to step in front of a speeding car on the Boll Weevil Circle. The concrete pavement is hard. And the steel of an automobile and the flesh and blood of my body don't mix well. So if I did either of these, I would come face-to-face with dependable laws of nature, and I would suffer the consequences of violating those laws.

In like manner, the Bible teaches us that there are dependable spiritual laws in this world, and that life works best for us when we honor and respect the spiritual laws of the universe. The covenant reminds us that life works best for us when we love God and love people.

God gave the covenant to Abraham: *"I will be your ONLY God and you shall be my SERVANT people."* But the people didn't get it. They continually broke the covenant. So God tried a second approach. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments to clarify and spell out the meaning of the covenant more specifically.

If you look in Exodus, Chapter 20, the first four Commandments define what it means when God said: *"I will be your ONLY God"*: No other gods before me. No graven images. No taking the Lord's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

And the last six Commandments show what it means to be God's SERVANT people: You respect your parents. You respect the sacredness of life. You respect the property of others. You respect the vows of marriage. You respect the truth. You respect the good fortune of others.

But even with the Ten Commandments in hand, the people still didn't get it. They kept on breaking the covenant. So next, God sent the prophets, who tried in all kinds of dramatic ways to call the people back to covenant faith.

But they didn't listen to the prophets, either. The people drifted farther and farther from God. A Savior was needed to redeem the situation. A SAVIOR WAS NEEDED TO BRING US BACK TO GOD. And that, of course, brings us to the third word.

THIRD, THERE IS CHRIST. Let me mention two verses of Scripture that summarize the impact of Christ on this world. The first verse is in the prologue to John's Gospel: *"The Word became flesh and lived among us. . . full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).

This means that Jesus Christ was the covenant wrapped up in a person, the covenant lived out before us. It's as if God said, *"They are not getting it. They don't understand my language – so I will show them! I will send my only Son into the world. He will show them the truth. He will show them my will."* And when they asked Christ about the greatest Commandment, what did he say? *"Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself,"* or in other words, *"I will be your only God, and you shall be my servant people."*

The other verse that sums up the work of Christ in the world comes from the apostle Paul writing to the church at Corinth. Paul said: *"In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself."*

You may have heard the story about the police officer who found a little boy sitting on the curb in the downtown section of a big city. The little boy was crying because he was lost.

The officer said, *"Don't worry. I'll help you! Look around and see if you can see anything that looks familiar."* The little boy looked around for a few moments, and then

suddenly his face brightened, because off in the distance he could see a church. It had a tall steeple with a cross on top.

The little boy said, *“There! Look! If you can get me to the cross, I can find my way home!”* In Christ, God was on the cross, reconciling the world to himself.

First, there is Creation. Second, there is Covenant. Third, there is Christ. AND FOURTH, THERE IS CHURCH. The task of the church is to continue the preaching, teaching, healing, caring ministry of Jesus Christ. When Jesus ascended into Heaven, He passed the torch of ministry on to us. We evaluate ourselves as a church by asking the question, *“How well are we continuing His ministry of love? Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to empower us and to work through us.”*

When all else fails, read the instructions and remember those four great recurring themes in the Scriptures — Creation, Covenant, Christ, and Church.

There is amazing help in the Bible for the living of these days. These ancient, time-honored instructions, though thousands of years old, are as fresh as the morning sun — and are as relevant today as they were when they were first spoken. But the Bible will have little impact on your life or mine, unless we read it, unless we study it.