

Biblical Worldview Themes for *Fundamentals of Literature*

This document is our answer to the question, What must a student understand and value in order to comprehend ninth-grade literature from a biblical worldview? What follows is a list of the themes that we believe are essential for ninth-grade students to understand and internalize. We anticipate that early in the course students will be required to *explain* these themes. However, as these themes recur, require students to *evaluate* ideas within these themes, *formulate* a Christian understanding of them, and *apply* what they have learned about these themes to real-life situations. We hope to achieve high levels of internalization whenever students are required to apply their learning.

Endurance—What motivates me to keep going when I want to quit?

Creation (Explain)

Endurance is “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty.”¹ Among the Greek philosophers, endurance without dependence upon others was considered virtuous.² But the Christian recognizes that dependence upon God is essential for the practice of any virtue, and dependence upon others is no vice but a necessary part of the creation order (Gen. 2:18). Endurance is also a necessary part of the created order because humans are finite. Any attempt to carry out the Creation Mandate will require hard work and perseverance. The selections dealing with Apollo 13 and excerpt from *Endurance: An Epic of Polar Adventure* all demonstrate that endurance often requires a combination of courage and intelligence along with perseverance. However, endurance is not merely physical. The poem “Penelope” reminds us that the most significant endurance may not be in epic adventures but at home, in one’s daily responsibilities.

Fall (Evaluate)

Endurance can also become an idol. This principle is evident in “The Most Dangerous Game,” in which a big-game hunter becomes so skilled in hunting animals that he begins to hunt humans. Mary Oliver’s “The Journey” suggests a fallen view of endurance. It is about endurance in leaving counsel and obligations behind in order to find one’s self and seek one’s own salvation. It is endurance against God and others.

Unbelievers often do endure as they should, but without reliance upon God. For instance, Homer presents Odysseus as enduring the temptations of the Sirens by physical restraint, whereas a Christian would endure by dependence upon God and growth in virtue. Sometimes external restraints are helpful (Prov. 5:8), but they are not sufficient (Prov. 5:21; 6:25; 7:25). Indeed, in the story of Circe (which is referenced in a note to the teacher), Odysseus is not faithful to Penelope as she has been to him.

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

Students should reflect on how a Christian should endure and for what goals a Christian ought to endure. This reflection should result in a transformation of how they live. Hebrews 10:32–12:13 (“An Unfailing Faith”) reflects on how faith in God enables believers to lead faithful lives under the pressure of persecution. The selections from *The*

1 *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, 3rd ed., edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ὑπομονή”; cf. “To undergo, bear, sustain (continuous pain, opposition, hardship, or annoyance); (sometimes more narrowly) to undergo without succumbing or giving way.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “endure,” sense II.3.a.

2 Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. by James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994; repr., 1996), 414–15.

Odyssey give students an opportunity to reflect on which goals are worthy of endurance, such as family. When examining this question, students should ask what a home is and why it is worth enduring much to return to. What is a marriage, and why is lifelong faithfulness to a spouse worthy of endurance? From a biblical worldview, marriage and family (which are central to the meaning of *home*) are foundational, God-ordained social structures worthy of much effort to maintain. “An Ancient Gesture” invites reflection on the painfulness of faithfulness. Students should ask why endurance in faithfulness is worth the suffering and what steps they could take now to prepare for future hardship.

The pieces by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois demonstrate the need for wisdom to be paired with endurance. Both men endured the evils of racial discrimination and segregation and suggested different ways of overcoming these evils. Students should evaluate their responses and propose lessons from their thought for today.

Ishmael Beah’s autobiographical selection reveals that those who have endured great difficulties have often learned lessons that can benefit others; students should reflect on difficulties they faced to discern whether their experiences would be helpful to share with others.

Discernment—How do I know what is true, good, and beautiful?

Creation (Explain)

Proverbs 8 (“In Praise of Wisdom”) teaches that wisdom was the first of God’s creation. Wisdom is embedded in the creation order that governs how the world works. In this way, wisdom or creational norms are the speech of Christ to all creation. All people are to be diligent in seeking to discern this wisdom. “A Retrieved Reformation” illustrates how our values shape our choices. Students should consider how valuing people and relationships over wealth reflects biblical values. Other selections require discernment to comprehend. Students need discernment to understand what the speaker in “My Last Duchess” truly thought of his wife and what he has done to her. “The Gift of the Magi” calls on students to discern what truly has value—not physical things but the willingness to sacrifice what is most dear for the sake of the other. “A Mad Tea-Party” calls on readers to discern the logical puns Carroll has woven into the text and to reflect on the logic of their own thoughts.

Fall (Evaluate)

“Phaëthon” shows the danger of rashness and pride and how these contrast with the biblical pursuit of wisdom. The excerpts from *Don Quixote* show the danger of living in a fantasy world and not reckoning with the world as it really is. However, Cervantes’s critique of chivalry in favor of realism may also be critiquing certain biblical values as unrealistic. Students should therefore critique the critique. “The Seventh Man” wrestles with how to deal with guilt and experience salvation when one feels responsible for the death of another. The selection speaks in these terms but apart from Christ. Students should evaluate why this approach to guilt is inadequate.

The lady love in “The Glove and the Lions” shows that she lacks the ability to discern between a natural demonstration of love and a vain demand for such a demonstration.

Abortion is a contemporary issue in which many people call good evil and evil good. The selection from *The Giver* provides students with an opportunity to consider how great evils are masked or made to seem good.

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

Augustine in his *Confessions* looks back on his life to discern how his sin nature shaped his actions and how his heart was therefore restless until it found its rest in God. Students should select a seminal event in their own life and examine it from a scriptural perspective as Augustine did. As students consider the message of the excerpts from *Don Quixote*, they should formulate a biblical approach to life that avoids the fantasy that Cervantes critiques as well as the realism he promotes. The selections from *David Copperfield* should provoke student reflection on what qualities make for a good spouse and how those qualities might be different from what they would currently value in a romantic relationship.

Hope—How do I become hopeful in hopeless situations?

Creation (Explain)

Hope is the virtue by which Christians anticipate the good things that God has promised in Scripture. It rests on the fact that God is providentially active in bringing all things to their promised end. Victor Hugo's poem "The Sower" ascribes dignity to a poor, hard-working farmer sowing his field. Perhaps implicit in this poem is the hope for a harvest. The Christian reader is reminded of the parable of the sower, which reminds readers of the variable results of even the Divine Sower's harvest. Marge Piercy's "To be of use" is an unintentional meditation on the Creation Mandate. By emphasizing the goodness of even mundane work, it provides balance for pieces such as "My heart leaps up," which sees nature as a refuge from work.

Fall (Evaluate)

The Fall affects hope in a number of ways. Foremost, it disconnects hope from God. The object of hope is then turned from God and His promises to other things. "Beauty and the Beast" gives students an opportunity to evaluate what is hoped for. Are wealth, family, and love worthy of hopes? If so, why and how do they relate to God? "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" shows the vanity of hopes that do not include change in character. President Roosevelt's four freedoms ("freedom of speech," "freedom of worship," "freedom from want," and "freedom from fear") were aspirational goal for the American people. The first two are part of the Bill of Rights and are valued by Christians because they give us latitude to practice the Christian religion. However, these are not timeless values. When Christ returns to rule creation, there will be no freedom of worship and certainly there will be no freedom to speak blasphemously and, likely, no freedom to speak falsely. Roosevelt's freedoms from want and fear were more controversial. They are universal human hopes, and these hopes will be realized when Christ returns to reign. But critics wondered if they are possible for a government to secure without the violation of other freedoms.

Yeats's poem "When You Are Old" raises the issue of unrequited hopes, and its speaker even encourages the woman he loved to regret that she did not love him in return. Students should reflect on a biblical response to unfulfilled hopes. "A Black Man Talks of Reaping" is a poem of unrealized hope. Despite hard work, neither the speaker nor his children enjoy the fruit of their labor. In his poem "The Battle-Field," William Cullen Bryant famously wrote, "Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again; / The eternal years of God are hers; / But Error, wounded, writhes with pain. / And dies among his worshippers." The hope for the triumph of truth is an ultimate hope, but in a fallen world there is no guarantee that truth will triumph in the short term.

William Wordsworth, in "My heart leaps up," hopes that he will always respond with natural piety when he sees the rainbow in the sky. There is something good in desiring to avoid a growing cynicism as one ages. But from a biblical worldview, there is not "natural piety" but rather a natural impiety, or sin nature. The Christian hope is that someone who grows in godliness will put away childish things and will instead have a deeper, truer piety than that had as a child.

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

The Christian sometimes struggles with remaining hopeful. In Psalms 42–43 ("Hope in God"), the psalmist directs his cast-down self to put his hope in God when facing oppression from ungodly, deceitful, and unjust men who seem to be triumphing. Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" speaks of the hopeless condition that many black Americans found themselves in due to racial injustice but concludes with a note of hope by discerning that the caged bird's song is a prayer to Heaven. This is the root of all true hope.

Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife, Sarah, speaks of having to "burn to ashes the hopes of future years" for the sake of the cause of maintaining the "American Civilization." Students should consider what causes they would consider worthy of sacrificing temporal hopes for.

Influence—Am I influencing others for good?

Creation (Explain)

Nicholas Gage’s “The Teacher Who Changed My Life” teaches that investing time in someone and challenging him or her can have a lasting influence on that person’s life. This is one way of living out the second Great Commandment. Ricardo Sánchez’s “Old Man” recognizes that one’s identity is shaped by one’s past—both one’s personal past and the family’s past.

Fall (Evaluate)

“Ballad of Birmingham” and the excerpts from *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910–1935* show that those who are wronged can have a positive influence as the wrong done to them is seen and known. This truth testifies to the fact that even sinners have consciences, and that seeing others wronged can stir those consciences. The excerpts from Condoleezza Rice’s memoir encourages people who have been wronged to be proactive about becoming people of influence despite the challenges they face.

May Swenson’s “The Universe” relativizes human identity, arguing that because the universe is not about us and has no laws, we can define our own identity. But if the universe is about us (because God has made humans vice-regents over His creation) and if the universe is about God, who built laws into creation that reflect His character, then humans cannot “unspin” the laws of the universe to freely craft their own identities.

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

James Brown’s “Letter to My Younger Self” reflects on what he has learned as he has grown older. Scripture teaches respect for older people because their life experience (when shaped by God’s Word) gives them greater wisdom than the young. In conjunction with this selection, students will ask parents, pastors, or other mentors what counsel they would have given to their younger selves. “Traveling” describes how two Jewish women (a mother and daughter), in different time periods, resisted racism against black Americans. This is an example of how even small acts of doing right can influence others around us, and students should reflect on how they have been faced with choices to do right or conform to social pressure in the mundane affairs of life—and on how they responded to these events.

The lesson of “Woman with Flower” is to “leave alone” a child to give him or her room to grow. This is a proverb that requires wisdom to apply. For instance, it is possible for a parent to be so directive about every detail of a growing child’s life that his or her love is smothering. On the other hand, to simply leave a child alone to find his or her way in the world is to abdicate the duty of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Identity—Where do I find my identity?

Creation (Explain)

The ability to conceptualize one’s identity distinguishes humans from the animals. There are numerous identity markers that the Bible recognizes as legitimate: these include our family (Exod. 20:12), our ethnic or national identity (Gen. 10; Rev. 5:9), our cultural identity (1 Cor. 9:20–22; Rev. 5:9), our sex (Gen. 2:22), our age (Prov. 20:29; Ecc. 12:1), our marital status (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 7:38), our work (Gen. 1:26–28), and our character. However, fundamental to our identity should be our relationship with God.³

The article “Work—A Gift or a Curse?” captures the biblical idea that part of our identity as humans is found in our work since God created human to be productive. Adelaide Crapsey’s “Amaze” reflects on the transformation of age, and thus raises the question of whether we maintain our identity through all the changes of our lives. The biblical answer to this question is in the affirmative. Even the dissolution and resurrection of the body does not dissolve our identity.

³ Brian S. Rosner, *Known by God: Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*, ed. by Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 33.

Fall (Evaluate)

Though all the identities noted above are legitimate identities, they can all become idols when they take the supreme place that should be reserved for God alone. The Matthew Diffie cartoon highlights the futility of rooting one's identity in things that "moth and rust . . . corrupt." Sara Teasdale's poem "Barter" calls on people to spend all for "loveliness" without counting the cost. However, this is to give to earthly loveliness what only should be given to God, who is ultimate loveliness.

Sinners also take evil things and find their identity in them. Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" shows the futility of finding one's identity in the things that lead to death. This is evident with those who drop out of school and engage in notable sin, but it is actually true of all identities (including those currently "cool" among cultural influencers) that are rooted in sin.

"The Necklace" reveals the foolishness and cost of trying to display an identity that is not one's true identity. However, a false identity is the trademark of social media presentation. What are the costs of presenting maintaining a social media presence with a false veneer? How would they be different, and how would they be similar to those portrayed in "The Necklace"? In "The Possibility of Evil," Shirley Jackson tells a story in which the main character seems to be a kind elderly lady outwardly while secretly she writes cruel letters to others. Students should reflect on how anonymity can facilitate cruelty in our social interactions, and how this manifests itself today in online interactions. This fact further reveals the evil present in the human heart.

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29" raises the issue of how to deal with being disgraced. In the sonnet, the poet finds self-worth in another human's love. Students should evaluate this perspective and find it insufficient. Only in the love of God in Christ toward us can we find a true way out of disgrace. Positively, the sonnet does raise the possibility that one can be in disgrace in other people's eyes and yet still be in a blessed condition.

Eve Merriam's "Metaphor" communicates the truth that each day gives us a new beginning. But there is false teaching here: we cannot do whatever we want. Choices from previous days do shape our possibilities for succeeding days.⁴

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

John 9 ("The Healing of a Blind Man") raises the question of identity on many levels. First, the man is identified as being blind, and the disciples wonder whether this man's blindness identifies him as guilty of particular sins. Once the man is healed, there is further debate over this man's identity: is this seeing man the one who was formerly blind? The healing of the man then raises debate over the identity of Jesus: is He a sinner, a man from God, or the Christ—Son of Man? This debate raises questions over the identity of the Pharisees: are they righteous, or are they blind (despite their profession of sight) and guilty? This passage invites student to reflect on whom they view Jesus to be and whether they are best identified with the blinded Pharisees or with the formerly blind man.

In George Herbert's "The Altar," the poet's identity is one whose heart of stone has been transformed into an altar to receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. The poem invites students to reflect on whether they have experienced such a transformation.

Death and the End [The End of Life and the End of the World]—What will the end be like, and how will I face it?

Creation (Explain)

Obviously, death is not creational but a result of the Fall. However, it is worth noting that Adam possessed the ability not to sin and not to die, but not the inability to sin or the inability to die. Since "immortality is the trait of deity alone (1 Tim 6:16)," Adam would have passed from potential mortality to immortality had he obeyed.⁵ Likewise,

⁴ We are constrained by God's law from doing whatever we want. Violated creational norms press back with consequences.

⁵ Kenneth A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 1A (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1996), 212.

we infer that had Adam not sinned, the earth would have moved from its initial state—being open to the possibility of decay—to its future state, in which it will not be. It is for this reason that death is the great and last enemy.

Fall (Evaluate)

Death and the end are realities that everyone must reckon with. Too often these realities are faced apart from God. Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" captures the evil of death, but he does not have a Christian perspective on how to respond to death.

"By the Waters of Babylon" is a post-apocalyptic story about how humans live and learn after the destruction of the world in a nuclear holocaust. The theme of the story seems to be the need to press beyond the limits of religion and rebuild civilization. But students should see the contradiction in this message, for the wisdom sought to rebuild civilization is coming from those who have destroyed it.

Redemption (Formulate, Apply)

John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 10" reflects on the defeat of the last enemy, death. For the believer, death shall die in the resurrection. Students should reflect on their own view of death. Do they simply ignore it, or do they fear it? They should formulate a biblical understanding of death. James Weldon Johnson's "Go Down, Death" captures Paul's teaching that "to die is gain" since it means "to depart, and to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:21, 23). However, it falls short of the biblical teaching that death is the last enemy, and it omits the resurrection from its consideration (1 Cor. 15:26).

The pairing of Shakespeare's "The Seven Ages of Man" with Ecclesiastes 12:1–8 prompts reflection on the effects of aging and how these should prompt living a God-fearing life in one's youth. Students should formulate ways that they can give their strength to their Creator in the days of their youth.

Revelation 8:6–9:20; 19:11–21:8 ("The Final Judgment and New Creation") provides students with the Bible's own vision of the end, which includes judgment but also the reversal of all the effects of the Fall.