

## **The Story of the Bible in Six Acts**

By Monte Johnston

So, you want to understand the Bible better? Since you are reading this first, you already know that the Bible is an intimidating book. It ranks up there with War and Peace or Moby Dick in the list of long books that people think would be good to read, but never do. Yet, even with those literature books, it is pretty easy to describe what they are about: a hunt for the Great White Whale, and war and peace. But with the Bible it seems harder. It's about God, of course, and the world, and Israel, and Jesus, and it has laws, and prayers and letters. But how does it all fit together and what does it say?

This question is more than a theoretical one; it is a practical one as well. It crops up when someone, maybe you, wants to grow in their faith and so they take up the Bible to read it. Not too many pages, or even paragraphs in, the reader soon comes upon some obscure detail, difficult name, or unknown place, and a seed of confusion sprouts. The question arises, how does this fit in with the rest of the Bible? Is this important to what comes later?

In this way, the Bible is no different than any other book. To make your reading useful and productive you need the big picture, the overarching story that makes sense of all the pieces.

Fear not more, help has arrived. To help you get a handle on that all-encompassing story, think of the Bible as a play in six acts, like one of the dramas of Shakespeare. In the pages ahead, each Act will focus on a major theme of the whole story. Let's begin by looking at the titles of each one:

- I. Creation
- II. Fall
- III. Israel
- IV. Jesus
- V. Church
- VI. Last Things

The order is chronological, so if you can remember them, you already have a sense of how the story develops. But they are also the big concepts that occur throughout the Bible, as

such they are really helpful in making sense of a lot of the particulars throughout the Bible. You will want to memorize them, and just by reading to the end, you will have fixed in your mind.

To briefly summarize then, we would say, God, out of his overflowing love, **creates** the world by his Word, making it wonderfully good, and filling it with his glory. Unfortunately, it doesn't remain so pure. The creatures God has made disobey and **fall** into sin. As a consequence, God's glory is hidden in creation and the relationship with humanity is broken. Nevertheless, God recreates a special relationship with one particular people — **Israel**. His purpose is that, through this people, all of the nations and peoples of the his creation would share in that relationship and be his people. Unfortunately, it didn't quite turn out this way. His chosen people didn't live up to their end of the agreement. Nevertheless, God had a better solution — himself. God came in **Jesus** to set things right, to fulfill Israel's end of the agreement, and so, to restore the relationship between God and the world. He did this through his death and resurrection. Consequently, Jesus created a new people by his Spirit, not of any one race or ethnicity, but of all who have faith. This new people is called the **church**, and they are to take the message of what he has done for the world, to the world. While his salvation has begun to spread, any look around the world will reveal that all is not yet right. Therefore, Jesus will return one day and complete God's original intent for creation. No more pain, sorrow, or grief, just God and the world together **at last**.

Got all of that? Don't worry. Each part will be broken down into easily digestible pieces. But this is the story of the Bible in a nutshell, with a few italicized words to help you see the structure. In the next six chapters we will have a closer look at each of the six acts and see how they build upon one another and so, after you understand each theme, or Act, individual passages of the Bible make much more sense.

Understanding the story of the Bible is important for more than just making sense of individual passages. It is important for knowing God, since the God of the Bible is personal. We come to know him by knowing his story. This is no different than getting to know another person. God has given himself to be known in his interactions with his

creation, with Israel, and chiefly in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Bible he is telling us his story. Any other source of knowledge about God pales in comparison.

Knowing the story of the Bible is also the most important way that we can come to understand ourselves, for the story of the Bible is our story. The most fundamental facts about ourselves is not where we grew up, what educational institution gave us a degree, or even who we married, but the fact that we were created by the Maker of Heaven and Earth, and made in the image of the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For those of us who have received Jesus in faith and given ourselves in return, then the subsequent story of salvation and redemption is our story and our future. If we fail to understand this story, or give it first place in our lives, then we will accept the stories our culture tells us, about success, beauty, worth, being the most important things about us. Ultimately, those stories turn out not to be life-giving stories, but joy-stealing stories, stories that set us on paths that could never lead to our full flowering and satisfaction.

There is nothing greater that we could give or receive than the story of God. It is the very definition of Good News.

---

The idea for presenting the Bible as a drama in a series of acts was hatched by N.T. Wright in his book, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

Scriptures quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. All rights reserved.

Monte Johnston is pastor of Discovery Church in Clayton, North Carolina.

## **Creation**

### The King establishes his Kingdom

#### **Once Upon a Time**

“Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away...”

There is something about those words. They instantaneously get our attention, as if they are hard-wired into our brains. They are the beginning of all the great stories, stories of such great scope, full of adventure, and stories where everything hangs in the balance. When you are a kid, these are the stories that you live in. You imagine yourself playing the lead role in these life or death stories. As adults, we are tempted to look down on these fabulous stories as mere diversions. We know that kids will have to ‘get real,’ sooner or later. But kids know better. Kids intuitively get it. Some adults get it too.

The first words of the Bible read, “In the Beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” This is the Bible’s version of “Once upon a time...” They open up the vast horizons of time and space, of history and all that happens within it. It abounds with possibilities. These first words insist that God created the world. It didn’t just exist. God didn’t happen upon it one day. The creatures of the world didn’t create God. No, it was the Lord God who created the heavens and the earth. Not only did he create them, but they are wonderful, and beautiful, and utterly marvelous.

The opposite of each of these ideas have been taught at some point or another: that God had to create the world, or that he needed to create the world, or that the world that he made was not really good, and so must ultimately be rejected. Each of these ideas are shown to be false by the first chapter of the Bible.

#### **Astonishment**

The deep truth in these first words is that the world didn’t have to exist at all, nor did it have to exist like it is. It is contingent — as the scientists say — and that should astonish us. It’s contingency causes us to ask, “Why is the world this way and not another?” And the

more we puzzle over that question, the more we should feel amazed by the world as it is. The more that one learns about the world, about the diversity of plants and animals, the complexity of the human eye, or the vast spaces between the stars, it is hard not to feel a growing sense of astonishment and wonder. I had a microbiology class in college and I left that class everyday full of amazement. More than anything else, I remember the professor teaching us that the remarkable thing about our immune system is, not that it fails and then we get sick, but, that we were ever well. So complex and interconnected is our immune system. For us to be “well” an unbelievable number of things have to go right.

Astonishment and wonder are the most appropriate responses to the wonders of the world. Every part of the world is contingent. It is so easy to get used to it all — to take it all for granted — as if it all had to be that way. But it didn't. The universe is the way that it is because that's the way that God created it. The universe is not mere matter; it is a creation, a work of art, conceived in the mind of the Creator and spoken into existence.

## Creation

It would be logical at this point to go through Genesis 1, the first chapter in the Bible, which gives an orderly account of God creating all heaven and earth, but I am not going to do that. I encourage you to read it soon and not how God freely creates it out of nothing, ordered and good. Without this as a first principle and foundation, the rest of the story will not hold together.

Instead, I want to demonstrate that this first theme — Creation — runs throughout the whole story and the whole story is built upon it. I chose Psalm 104. The Psalms are the songs and prayers of the Bible. As you read the following verses, I invite you to share the author's sense of astonishment:

*16 The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. 17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. 18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. 19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. 20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. 21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. 22*

*When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. 23 People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening. 24 O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.*

In these verses the psalmist is recounting the wonders of creation. As he does so, he brings to light something of great importance. The creation is meant to point us to the Creator. The glory of creation is a dim reflection of the glory and majesty of the Creator, but it is a reflection nonetheless. If we forget about the creator as we behold the creation, it's like admiring a work of art as if it just appeared out of thin air. Yet we do this all the time, don't we? Or at least I do. In Romans 1:25, it describes our sinful condition, "They worshipped the creation, rather than the creator." When this happens, our astonishment stops at the creation rather than pushing on through to the Creator.

The Psalmist doesn't do that. He exclaims, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom, you have made them all." God is the one who is to be praised in light of creation.

## **Repetition**

What we learn about creation from the Bible is that it's good. God is said to delight in it. Try to imagine that for a moment: God looking down at creation and taking delight in it. Does that seem odd to you? You would think that he gets bored with it just as we do.

When we do something repeatedly, almost anything, we get tired of it. My kids hear a new song and they want to listen to it over and over and over and over again. Why is that? It is because they have so much energy, whereas I get tired.

About a hundred years ago a British newspaperman and devout Christian, named, G.K. Chesterton, wrote a book, entitled, *Orthodoxy*. In his book, Chesterton this point about repetition. He says that what we see in repetition is something impersonal and lifeless, like the rising of the sun. It is no longer remarkable because it happens everyday. Children show us otherwise. They love to repeat things because they are full of energy. Chesterton explains,

*Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free,*

*therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore.*

Doesn't that give you a different picture of what God is like? He is not far off and aloof, nor is he unfeeling and unmoved by this world. He is intimately and intricately involved, delighting in every little detail. That is what the doctrine of creation teaches us. It is this relationship between God and the world that he has made which undergirds the story as it unfolds from this marvelous and spectacular beginnings.

## **Humans**

There is something even more amazing still. People. You and I. We learn in the first chapters of the Bible that every person is made in the image and likeness of God.

*26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (NRSV)*

Every person is amazing and invaluable. Every person reflects the glory of the eternal God. Each one is of infinite worth and is the way they are, because God, in his wisdom, chose to make them that way. So, the next time that you encounter another human, maybe an complete jerk, and you are tempted to write them off as useless or worthless, remember that God made them. And you should be amazed by them. God loves them and delights in them more than in daisies. And so should you. That is how an understanding of creation should change the way that we live and think. Oh, and by the way, you are absolutely wonderful and amazing too, because that is how God made you.

## Why Start Here?

We begin telling the story of this six act play with creation, even though there is not much action. We start the story with the making of the world, because the rest of the story is not just the story about God but also of Creation. The universe is good. The world that God created is miraculous and didn't have to be that way. It should move us to admiration and delight in this wonderful place.

We begin with creation because it forms the context of the rest of the story. Creation shows us God's original intent for the world. There existed a wonderful relationship between himself and world. Not only that but also between all of the creatures of the world. Humans were in right relationship with him, with one another, and with the creation that he made.

The Bible describes God as the King of the cosmos, his kingdom. We will hear a lot more about his Kingdom as the story progresses. The situation of all things being in right relationship with one another is the right starting point in understanding what his kingdom is all about.

We are going to see in the next act that this situation doesn't last. Sin comes into the world, and spoils it. Rebellion breaks out in the kingdom. Nevertheless, God's intention is always to restore that original relationship between himself and the world. His motivation in all that he does — even in judging sin — is his love for the world. He loves it and delights in it. It is not an evil that needs to be wiped out. This goes for human culture too, that is, the things that we create. They may need to be purged and redeemed but not utterly destroyed. We shall see that this is exactly what happens when the story ends with the redemption of creation. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

We also begin with creation because it forms the context for our lives; it is where we live. We should take joy in the wonders of God's world. It is amazing that the sun rose today and flowers were bloomed. It is amazing that we are ever healthy. It is amazing that God should value you so highly and honor us so greatly. Thus, with the Psalmist we exclaim, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom, you have made them all."

## **Fall**

### Rebellion in the Kingdom

#### **Off Course**

In 1979 a large passenger jet with 257 people on board left New Zealand for a sightseeing flight to Antarctica and back. Unknown to the pilots, however, the flight coordinates were off by a mere two degrees. This small error placed the aircraft 28 miles to the east of where the pilots assumed they were. As they approached Antarctica, the pilots descended to a lower altitude to give the passengers a better look at the landscape. Although both were experienced pilots, neither had made this particular flight before, and so they had no way of knowing that the incorrect coordinates had placed them directly in the path of Mount Erebus, an active volcano that rises from the frozen landscape to a height of more than 12,000 feet.

As the pilots flew onward, the white of the snow and ice covering the volcano blended with the white of the clouds above, making it appear as though they were flying over flat ground. By the time the instruments sounded the warning that the ground was rising fast toward them, it was too late. The airplane crashed into the side of the volcano, killing everyone on board.

It was a terrible tragedy brought on by a minor error—a matter of only a couple of degrees. How much of a difference does two degrees make?

If Christopher Columbus was two degrees off course when returning home, he would have been 130 miles off course.

If a space ship were two degrees off course on its way to the moon, by how far would they miss? Only by 7884 miles. The longer you travel off course, the further you will be away from the intended target.

The same thing is true for sin. The longer we travel off course, the further we will be away from God. We can think of sin as traveling off course.

## The Story

In Act 1 of our story, we saw how God, the King of the Universe, created a wonderful kingdom, which we call the world. This world was marked by abundance and wholeness and integrity and flourishing. You might be thinking that such a description doesn't quite match up with a description you would get from the world from today's news. Why is that? This brings us to the second act in our story.

In Act 2, sin enters the world. Evil enters the world already in the third chapter of the Bible, beginning with a seemingly insignificant sin — eating some fruit. This is not something we would rank up there deserving capital punishment. But the fruit was not the issue. Obeying God's command was the issue. The heart of the matter was trusting God and believing that his commands are for our good — not to steal away our happiness — and letting him direct our lives. This is exactly what didn't happen. Adam and Eve were told that they could enjoy the whole creation, but they just had to stay away from one tree. But they were certain that they knew better. Consequently, they reaped the consequences of their actions and were excluded from the garden. This exclusion from the garden is a symbol of their separation from God, but not just from God. No sooner had they disobeyed God than sin began its evil work. First, they realized that they were naked. They felt shame and embarrassment for the first time. They felt the need for distance between one another, in order to avoid complete intimacy and vulnerability. And they pointed the finger of blame. When asked why Adam had eaten the fruit, he exclaimed that Eve had made him do it. When Eve was questioned, she blamed the serpent. Sin meant throwing each other under the bus and not taking responsibility for their own actions.

We tend to think of sin as a very individual thing. But it is of the nature of sin that it never just affects the sinner. It always spreads and impacts those around, because we are by nature, relational. We are interconnected with one another. Take what Adam and Eve did — blaming, for instance.

## Blaming is Contagious

According to a new study, blaming mistakes on others is socially contagious. That's right! Just watching someone pawn their failures off on another can make you do the same thing, just to protect your self-image. Nathanael Fast, of the University of Southern California and Larissa Tiedens of Stanford University conducted the study and published the results. In one experiment, results showed nearly 80 percent of participants in the group that read a story about blame pointed the finger at others for their own mistakes, while just under 40 percent of those in the group that read about the main character taking responsibility did the same.

Whatever the blunder, from messing up at work to burning dinner, pointing the finger at someone or something else might seem trivial. But in organizations where blame is the norm, group members are likely to be less creative and perform poorly, research shows.

A part of the explanation is the kick-the-dog effect. "It's the kick-the-dog effect where if someone high in the hierarchy makes a mistake and blames the person below them for the mistake and that person blames the person below them and so on, and when there's no one else to blame that person goes home and kicks the dog," Professor Fast told the magazine LiveScience.

But blame is only one of the ways that sin travels and gets transmitted.

## **Biblically Off-Course**

If you start with a small, seemingly insignificant sin, it doesn't stay that way. We see that in the story of the Bible.

The original sin didn't seem like any big deal. But for the sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, it was not a matter of stealing a bit of fruit. No, in them animosity grew, so that in chapter four of Genesis, jealousy and guilt already give way to murder, as Cain takes the life of his brother Abel. Things are clearly not going in the right direction. Then, just a couple of chapters later, it says,

*The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that*

*every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 5:5-6)*

Evil multiplies and grows like kudzu. This is because evil can only beget evil. Evil never produces good. Therefore, what comes next is the great flood, where God judges the sin and wipes out the evil-doers from the earth, the way a surgeon cuts out cancer. He starts over with Noah, for he was a righteous man. While Noah was a righteous man, his sons were not. And so sin festers, grows and spreads once more.

In Genesis 11 we find the story of the Tower of Babel, where the people of the earth were banding together to build a tower to the heavens (or to the gods), so that they could make a name for themselves. They could be famous and exercise control over others. God honored his promise that he made to Noah and did not destroy them, but he did frustrate their plans, for he couldn't let their sin go unchecked, running headlong to its logical end. It is clear already at this point in the story that salvation could not be based on the goodness of any person. The seeds of sin lay in every human heart, whether we can admit it or not.

## **Total Depravity**

This state of affairs is the case at every point in history, not just in ancient times. Consider what the apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 3. Paul begins this letter by presenting evidence of just how evil the pagans and non-Jews are. The Jews reading this letter would surely have been vigorously nodding their heads in agreement. "Yes, they are bad and deserving of punishment!" The Jews were God's people, after all, and the pagan gentiles were not. They had God's law while the foreigners did not. Just when their nodding was really gaining steam, Paul turns the tables and says that when it comes to sin, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Let's listen in. Romans 3:9-20:

*9 Well then, are we Jews better than others? No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. 10 As the Scriptures say, "No one is good -- not even one. 11 No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. 12 All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one." 13 "Their talk is foul, like the stench*

*from an open grave. Their speech is filled with lies." "The poison of a deadly snake drips from their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "They are quick to commit murder. 16 Wherever they go, destruction and misery follow them. 17 They do not know what true peace is." 18 "They have no fear of God to restrain them." 19 Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to bring the entire world into judgment before God. 20 For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands. For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.*

All of the phrases with quotes around them come directly from the Old Testament. He is citing their own Scriptures against them. And what an indictment! “No one is good -- not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong.” He is saying that everyone has gone off course. No one can say that they have stayed true to God.

He continues, “No one does good, not even one!” Really? What does he mean? There is no good in the world? That cannot be right. To answer that let me detour just a minute.

When we talk about the extent of sin, just how bad it is, some have used the words, “total depravity,” while others have complained against that, saying, “That’s too harsh, too negative—people are capable of bad things, sure, but they are also capable of good things.” However, this teaching does not say that humans are incapable of anything good. It says that there is nothing that we can do that is *wholly* good. Everything is tainted by our sin. Even a generous deed where you give someone groceries can be done for selfish motives and be a source of pride, prompting you to look down on people who aren’t as generous as you. Even our best deeds and efforts can lead us astray. But there is another fact about sin that we don’t want to acknowledge, our own capacity to sin and do evil.

## **Capacity for Evil**

Kay Warren is the wife of Rick Warren, pastor of one of the largest churches in the country, and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. It was Kay that got Rick and his church focused on the needs of Africa. She wrote this about her encounter with Africa, and her own fallenness.

*The first time I visited Rwanda, I went looking for monsters.... I had heard about the 1994 genocide that had left one million people dead—tortured, raped, viciously murdered—and somehow I thought it would be easy to spot the perpetrators. I naïvely assumed I would be able to look men and women in the eyes and tell if they had been involved. I was full of self-righteous judgment.*

*What I found left me puzzled, confused, and ultimately frightened. Instead of finding leering, menacing creatures, I met men and women who looked and behaved a lot like me. They took care of their families, went to work, chatted with their neighbors, laughed, cried, prayed, and worshiped. Where were the monsters? Where were the evildoers capable of heinous acts? Slowly, with a deepening sense of dread, I understood the truth: There were no monsters in Rwanda, just people like you and me. ...*

*Before that trip, I can't tell you the number of times I reacted to evil I read about or witnessed by saying, "I would never do that!" But thousands of years of bloody human history prove differently. Fifty-four years of my own history prove differently. We are all proficient in our ability to conceive, plan, and execute evil. Of course, we don't call it evil when we're the ones involved. But it is. As French writer La Rochefoucauld observed, "There is hardly a man clever enough to recognize the full extent of the evil he does." You might as well face the shameful truth: You and I, put in the right situation, will do absolutely anything. Given the right circumstances, I am capable of any sin. I've grown more afraid of the monster lurking in the dark corners of my soul than of any monster lurking in the dark corners of my house.*

We think that the the evil is in those people out there, but it is the same evil that is in our hearts.

The news of the Bible about sin is unmistakably bad. It's as if we went in to the doctor, thinking we had a cold, only to be told that we had a disease that will kill us. "The consequences of sin is a death sentence," (NLT?) Paul says in Romans. The Bible cannot be more clear. The disease of sin is fatal, incurable, and everyone has it.

Not surprisingly, we like to deal with our sinfulness by insisting that we only have a virus. "Give me some Tamaflu, or maybe an antibiotic. But let's not get carried away. I sure don't need chemo or surgery or anything that drastic!"

"But if it is that bad, what can we do?" you might be asking. The first thing that you need to do if your situation is that bad is admit it. You cannot be cured unless you are really honest with yourself and with God about the problem. This is true with sickness. It is also

true with navigation. If you are 2 degrees off course, the sooner you admit it, the better off you will be.

The way of the world tries to deny sin, to downplay it, to say that it is not big deal. But this is not good. It's not good in personal relationships. It's not good with God. It leads to denial and blame.

Actually, the best thing you can do is to be honest about your sin and failings. The best news about our sin is how bad it is. The fact that our case is so severe means that only God can help us. Our sin is so significant that we cannot heal ourselves. It is only when we understand how bad our condition is that we can understand how much God has done for us.

King David discovered this the hard way. We have a very moving prayer of his after he was confronted by Nathan the prophet for committing adultery with Bathsheba. We learn what truth and honesty in prayer is by praying with him:

*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. 2 Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. 3 For I recognize my shameful deeds -- they haunt me day and night. 4 Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. (Psalm 51:1-4, NLT)*

## **Israel**

### **The King Chooses Israel**

#### **The Story of the King**

After going through the first two Acts in our story in six Acts, it would be helpful at this point to review where we are and where we are going. Here are the six themes again, but with different titles, which you can think of as sub-titles to the major headings.

- I. The King establishes his Kingdom (Creation)
- II. Rebellion in the Kingdom (Fall)
- III. The King Chooses Israel (Israel)
- IV. The Coming of the King (Jesus)
- V. Spreading the News of the King (Church)
- VI. The Return of the King (Last Things)

To recap, God, the King of the Universe, creates a wonderful Kingdom, which we call the world. It is full of beauty, order, truth, and goodness. Everything is subject to his loving rule and his caring concern. Humans were in a great relationship with the King, as well as with one another, and the rest of the world that God made.

But soon, they decided that they didn't want to be under his rule. They wanted to decide for themselves what was good and what was right. Therefore, they rebelled against his rule and went their own way. This is really what we mean by the big word, Sin — living like we want to live, rather than the way that God designed us to, in subjection to him. There were consequences for this free choice: broken relationships, guilt, oppression, exploitation, and deceit, to name just a few.

Facing mass rebellion in his Kingdom, the King creates a new people within the world, to be his faithful people, and through whom the rest of Creation will be reconciled to him. Unfortunately, the Israelites, the people that he formed, are not faithful to him and a pattern develops between the King and his people, a cycle of sin. The cycle goes like this:

his people turn away from him and do what is right in their own eyes, he rebukes them, they realize their error and turn back to him, and he restores them out of his grace and mercy. Only to have the cycle begin again.

## **The King Chooses Israel**

Currently, where we are in the story is where rebellion enters the Kingdom. This introduces a huge problem. God created the Universe to be a creation under his authority, but his creatures refused to live under that authority. Now, there is a realm on earth that is not subject to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. What was the Maker of Heaven and Earth and the only rightful Ruler to do? He could have come with force and put down the rebellion. He would have been entirely just and in the right if he had. However, God, being by nature gracious and merciful, did the exact opposite. The Triune God decided to infiltrate the rebellion and undermine it from within. He decided to start small. He began with a seed that would grow into tree.

God chose one man, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah. They would be the means by which he would remove the curse of the sinful rebellion and restore the original relationship that was pictured in the garden. Before God calls Abraham, we know nothing about him. He gets no mention nor are we told anything about him. This is surprising, and stands in contrast to Noah, who was described as a righteous man, but not Abraham. The only thing that made Abraham special was that God chose him. (It's the same thing for you and I.)

God calls Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 with these words:

*1 Then the LORD told Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. 2 I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others. 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you." (NRSV)*

Abraham and Sarah must leave their family and their homeland. God is carving them out from other families. They have to be different. They will form a subset of God's creatures, one's that will be subject to his rule and authority. If they do this, then he will do three things for them.

1. Give them a new land to call their own. Before, the whole world was under God's rule, but now theirs will be one land where the Lord is honored and worshiped and where his rule is evident.
2. They will become a great nation. Abraham and Sarah will have many descendants. They are like a new Adam and Eve. In the ancient world have many descendants was a crown of glory and one of the highest form of riches.
3. They will be blessed. And just as important, God wants to use them to bless all the families of the earth. God chooses this one people of the earth, who have a privileged place in his plan, but the goal is bringing all of creation but under his rule and authority.

God starts with these two people and works with their descendants, the chosen people we know as the Jews, in order to bless the nations. He would give them a place, a promised land, to serve as the staging ground for bringing salvation to the rest of the world.

What we see here is a pattern that recurs throughout the Old Testament. The pattern is a narrowing down, where the scope of God's activity and saving purpose is narrowed and gets smaller and smaller, and more and more concentrated. Even though this narrowing includes fewer and fewer people, it is always for the sake of the world.

Through the rest of the book of Genesis, God shows his faithful and his protective care for Abraham and his descendants. At the end of the book, they end in Egypt. Exodus, the second book in the Bible, begins 400 years later and the few have become many. But these numerous Jews are enslaved, until God sends Moses to bring them out and into their own land, as promised.

After rescuing them from the Egyptians and leading them into the desert, God calls Moses up to the mountain. Before going any further, God will make his covenant with them. He will lay out what it means to be God's people, and just what is required to live in relationship with the Holy God.

Here is what he says to Moses in Exodus 19:

*3 Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."*

The foundation of the covenant is God's saving action. God is always that one who initiates the relationship. This is why he begins by reminding them that He is the one who saved them, and brought them to himself. Now they have to respond. The essence of the covenant, which we shall see later, is expressed in these words, "I will be your God and you will be my people." God binds himself to them as their God, and asks that they bind themselves to him in return. They do this by obeying his voice and keeping his covenant. In order to be to be "a priestly kingdom holy nation," they need to be different and to be holy. So God gives them the 10 Commandments in the very next chapter. They are called to be different and separate for a purpose, his larger purpose of saving the world.

Unfortunately, they didn't obey and believe, and keep God first in their hearts and lives. So, they had to wander in the wilderness before entering into the land that the Lord had promised to them. They had to be chastised and had to repent. This would be the pattern of their lives as God's people.

## **A Vicious Cycle**

Even though God had called them out of the world, they still had the sin of the world within them. Sadly, and in spite of God's repeated warnings and pleadings, they followed their own wisdom. They wanted to live the way that seemed best to them. And so after they entered the Promised Land, we see a recurrent pattern in their relationship with God, a cycle of:

- rebellion,
- repercussions,
- repentance, and
- reconciliation

The pattern recurs again and again, but to provide but one example we will look at it in Judges 10.

*6 The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, worshipping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned the Lord, and did not worship him. 7 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, 8 and they crushed and oppressed the Israelites that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. (NRSV)*

The passage begins with Rebellion. They did evil by following and worshipping the gods and idols of their neighbors and foreign peoples. They wanted gods that would give them what they wanted. And so come the Repercussions. Fittingly, the Lord gave them what they wanted and handed them over to their neighbors, whose gods they worshipped and wished to please.

In verse 10 it says that Israel cries out to the Lord, acknowledging that they have sinned and followed other gods. The Lord reminds them of how many times that he has saved them, and concludes

*14 Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress." 15 And the Israelites said to the Lord, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you; but deliver us this day!" 16 So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshiped the Lord; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.*

The Israelites have reaped the consequences of their actions, and their way did not yield the happiness they expected. Repercussions give way to Repentance. They turn from their sin and throw themselves upon the mercy of the God who saved and created them. They do know God at least this well, for he does have mercy upon them and never wants to see them suffer. Their sin is never so great that they are beyond saving or beyond hope.

This pattern is clear: when they follow other gods, the Lord will hand them over to those nations and their gods. The Israelites concluded by the end of the time of the Judges (probably better called the savior-heroes), whom God would send to save them from their

enemies, that they were getting conquered because they had no king. This story is recounted in the next Act, but it is enough for now to say that their kings could not save them from their sin. They continued to want to rule over themselves, where each one did as he pleased.

Throughout the time of the kings, the vicious cycle continued. Not only continued but continued to get worse. After warning after warning, God made good on his promise. He handed northern Israel over to the army of Assyria. The country was largely depopulated. Then less than 200 years later, he handed the two southern tribes, called Judah, including Jerusalem, to the Babylonians. This exile was a death sentence upon the nation. God's project of using this people to reconcile the world to himself seems done for. Their sinful ways seemed to have the final word. They refused God's rule, rejected his covenant, and trusted in foreign powers.

## **A New Wind Blows**

But all was not lost. God would not let the faithlessness of his people keep him from being faithful. He gives his prophets visions of the future. Ezekiel 37 contains one such vision that is memorable because of its vivid imagery and cherished because of its hope.

*1 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." 7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

This valley is the very picture of hopelessness. It is hard to imagine a more hopeless picture. There is no life left in the entire valley, none. It is not just dry bones, but it looks like a great army was defeated here, a defeat so complete that there was no one left to bury the dead. This army was completely wiped out and so there are only dry bones left. A failed and costly venture.

But God commands Ezekiel to foretell of a time when these bones will live. They will have flesh and skin, and God's breath will come into them. The words for breath and Spirit are the same in Hebrew.

As Ezekiel spoke the Word of the Lord to them, the bones came together, end to end. And the tendons and ligaments grew on them, muscle grew, fortunately skin grew on them soon enough (it must have looked pretty gruesome before that). Finally, the Spirit of God entered them and they stood, a vast army, a strong power, a force in the world.

What does the vision mean? The next three verses are the explanation of this incredible sight.

*11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."*

Remember these words come to Israelites while they are in exile. Even as they have lost hope, God promises new life. He promises to bring them back to the Promised Land. This restoration is depicted as resurrection; resurrection is how they are going to know that the Lord is God. Moreover, he will be sending his Spirit into them. The redemption is about more than just Israel, as you should be seeing by now. It goes back to the original intent as the last verses in the chapter show.

*Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 24 My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. 25 They shall live in the land that I*

*gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. 27 My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28 Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.*

There are several key points that cannot be missed.

1. This future action of God will be how he fulfill his covenant: "Then they shall be my people and I will be their God." These words express the heart of God's covenant commitment to his people. The Lord will cement his relationship with his people.
2. They will have one King over them. Not a foreign nation and not multiple kings as they had before the exile. The hope and the work of Israel is going to get distilled down to just one person. It will be through him that God will establish his eternal kingdom. We know that this is Jesus. Jesus does what Israel could not do on her own.
3. Israel will obey God. She will follow the law. As she does, she will be a sign to the nations. This right response to God was what she was called to do as part of the covenant. While she hasn't done it yet, part of the promise is that God's people will be able to give a response that is pleasing to the Lord.
4. They will have a life that goes on and on. This resurrected, everlasting life will not be subject to death and will not be cut short.
5. All of this new life is like a second Creation. In verse 26 it says that he will bless them and multiply them. It is reminiscent of God's charge to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. We are talking about the entire world again.
6. God will be in their midst once again, as as he was in the Garden when he would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. But it also points to forward to Jesus who is called, "God with us," as well as the Spirit who is God in us.
7. Finally, there is the larger purpose. In the final verse it reads, "The nations will know the

Lord." Even here in this grand vision of Israel's redemption, it is made clear that God's salvation is not just for Israel, but for the nations, for the world. Israel is supposed to be an example for the nations so that they whole world can know the Lord.

Only resurrection can break the cycle of rebellion, repercussions, etc. Even though so much of the Old Testament is the story of failure and defeat, there are these deep, hopeful tones that reverberate underneath it all. This Act would end as badly as the last except that along the way, God had planted the seeds of a different outcome. One of Israel's kings, David, who was faithful to God. So God promised to send another King to Israel, a son of David, who will lead Israel in the way of God, as God's representative to the world, finally bringing God's blessing to the world.

It is to that part of the story, and to the New Testament, that we now turn.

## Jesus

### The Coming of the King

#### The Death of Jesus

In the previous chapter, we basically covered the whole sweep of the story of the Old Testament. As we approach the New Testament, let's zoom in on one particular event, perhaps the most significant event in history: the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Leading up to the cross, Jesus had been arrested in Jerusalem during the festival of the Passover, when the Jews commemorated God's saving action of freeing them from slavery to the Egyptians. As a generous gesture, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, would release a prisoner during the festival to win some political points with the people that he ruled with power of the Roman legions. A large group of religious leaders had approached Pilate, asking for the annual release of the prisoner. The prisoner that he has in mind is Jesus, because he didn't really think that he deserved the treatment that Jesus was getting and was looking for a way out. The following is how Mark tells it in his gospel. Notice the title "the King of the Jews" and all of the royal imagery, like crowns and purple cloaks, as you read it.

*9 Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify him!" 14 Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. 16 Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. 17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. 18 And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. 20 After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him... 22 Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). 23 And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. 25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they*

*crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." (Mark 15:9-26, NRSV)*

Imagine that you were a traveling merchant traversing the Roman Empire to earn your keep. Business has taken you to Jerusalem during the Passover, since the throngs of Jewish pilgrims filling Jerusalem would provide many opportunities for trade. As a global traveler you never miss a chance to get a taste of the local culture, and so, you join the crowds as they gathered and so become a first-person witness to the death of this man from Nazareth. Most likely, you would have no idea what was going on. With a bit of questioning of the woman next to you, you learn that Jesus was a Jewish teacher with many followers, and who taught that God was ushering in his Kingdom in these very days. Exciting stuff no doubt; except this salvation wasn't going to come through the regular, Jewish religious leaders or institutions. Even if you had witnessed all that happened on Golgotha and stayed at the foot of the cross to the very end, there would have been nothing that would have made you conclude that you just witnessed the greatest event in all world history. In fact, it would have made more sense to conclude that you had just witnessed a great failure rather than a great triumph.

What was it that happened on that day? Who is Jesus and what did he do, particularly to get himself killed? This was the hot question in Jesus' lifetime and has been ever since. People have always been tempted to give answers that tend to make Jesus in their own image. A revolutionary sees Jesus as a revolutionary. Liberals see Jesus as a liberal and conservatives see him as conservative. People who want all religions to boil down to the same thing see Jesus as a generic type of religious hero that only wants to include people. The only way that we can see who Jesus really was and what he did is to read him in context, the context of the whole Bible.

## **The Story**

What did Jesus do and what happened in his death? If you just look at a single Act in the drama, you can't tell. The authors of the Gospels (the first four books in the New Testament that recount the life of Jesus) made it clear, as they told the story of Jesus, that in all that he said and did, *he fulfilled the promises of God and the hopes and expectations of Israel.*

This is the best way to understand what Jesus did and what the cross was all about. This is what the random eye-witness to the crucifixion would never have known, but it is the key. To put it another way, it is the whole story of the Bible that explains what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

Up until this point in the story, we have a lot of promises that have not been completely fulfilled and many expectations that haven't been either. What Jesus does is to walk back through them and fulfill them all. Let me give you some examples from things we have discussed so far.

We began the story with the widest possible scope: the creation of the world and Adam and Eve. In the New Testament Paul calls Jesus the new Adam. (See Romans 4). Unlike the first Adam who brought sin and death into the world, Jesus will bring life. After the fall of humanity in Genesis 3, there is a promise of a descendant of Adam and Eve who would crush the power of the serpent. That was Jesus. The Bible is saying that Jesus is the fresh start, the new beginning, the new creation.

Fast forward a few chapters. Just as God chose Abraham in the Old Testament to be the father of his people, so in the New Testament God chooses Jesus ("You are my son, with whom I am well-pleased") and makes a new spiritual family out of his followers. That's why Jesus chose the 12 disciples, for the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus is the new Abraham. There needed to be a new Abraham because the descendants of Abraham did not keep their covenant with God.

Just as the Israelites went down to Egypt to escape famine, so after Jesus was born, his family fled Herod's wrath and fled to Egypt. Israel spent 40 years wandering in the desert afterward. So in the same way, Jesus spent a symbolic 40 days in the wilderness, although he resisted temptation in the wilderness instead of giving in. Just as the Jews crossed through the Jordan River to reach the Promised Land, so Jesus began his public ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan, suggesting that he would lead people to an even greater Promised Land.

The towering figure in the Old Testament is Moses who, after escaping death as an infant,

spends 40 years in the desert, leads the Jews out of Egypt and gives them the law of God, including the 10 Commandments. In Deuteronomy 18 there is a prophesy given to Moses from God:

*18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is the new Moses. He escaped death as an infant, spent time in the desert, leads people to salvation through water, and gives them a new law. This is why the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that Jesus gives his Sermon on a Mount, just as Moses brought the 10 Commandments down from the mountain.

If you are not familiar with the Old Testament, this may feel a bit like drinking from a fire hose. But these examples and many others demonstrate why the Old Testament is so important, because it explains what Jesus was up to. Without it, neither the disciples nor Paul nor Christians today could understand what he was all about. Jesus did what Israel was supposed to do. He retraced their steps, as it were, except where they went astray, he got it right. All along the way the writers of the New Testament were pointing out the signs that this is what Jesus was doing.

## **Reading the Signs**

When trying to read the Bible, this all might seem like so much ancient history. But signs of one's identity are something that is just as important today. You probably don't know the name of David Greenglass. I didn't until I read his story about how he was a traitor to the United States during World War II.

*He gave atomic secrets to the Soviet Union and then fled to Mexico after the war. His conspirators arranged to help him by planning a meeting with the secretary of the Soviet ambassador in Mexico City. Proper identification for both parties became vital. Greenglass was to identify himself with six prearranged signs. These instructions had been given to both the secretary and Greenglass so there would be no possibility of making a mistake. The signs were: (1) once in Mexico City, Greenglass was to write a note to the secretary, signing his name as "I. Jackson"; (2) after three days he was to go to the Plaza de Colon in Mexico City, and (3) stand before the statue of Columbus, (4) with his middle finger placed in a guide book. In addition, (5) when*

*he was approached, he was to say it was a magnificent statue and that he was from Oklahoma. (6) The secretary was to then give him a passport.*

Clearly, this elaborate procedure was developed so that there could be no mistaking Greenglass for anyone else—and they worked. No one would do all of those things by chance. Someone has counted 456 identifying characteristics from the Old Testament that Jesus fulfilled, including being from Nazareth.

You may have run across some of these while reading the Bible. At the time they may have seemed irrelevant, arcane details, empty of the encouragement and insight that you were hoping to find when you took up the Bible. However, if we are to understand Jesus and what he accomplished for us and for the world, we need to understand that he fulfilled all of the signs. All of the signs point to the fact that he was the promised, the descendent of David, the true King of the Jews.

## **Jesus Killed as King**

Jesus is the King who came to fully establish his Kingdom. If you look at the text from Mark 15, with which we began this Act, you can see that Jesus wasn't crucified as some bandit or regular revolutionary, but as King of the Jews. This is what Pilate called him. It was the title on the lips of the soldiers as well as on the sign nailed to the cross, signaling to all onlookers just what his crime was. He wasn't a king in any usual sense, so we need to look again at the larger story. Let's go back to the previous Acts.

**Creation.** Telling the story in a slightly different way we begin: Once upon a time, or rather, "In the Beginning...", God, the King of the Universe, creates a wonderful Kingdom, which we call the world. It is full of beauty, order, truth, and goodness. The King created the world and his intention was that he would be the king of all creatures. He would provide for them, protect them, and rule for their good, and they in turn would follow and obey him.

**Fall.** But there was rebellion in the Kingdom. His creatures decided that they didn't want to be under his rule. They wanted to decide for themselves what was good and right.

Therefore, they rebelled against his rule and went their own way. They revolted. This is really what we mean by the big word, sin— living like we want to live, rather than the way that God designed us to. And of course there were consequences: broken relationships, guilt, oppression, exploitation, and deceit, not to mention the loss of fellowship with God.

**Israel.** Facing the mass rebellion in the Kingdom, in Act III, the King creates a new people within the world, to be his faithful people, and through whom the rest of creation will be reconciled to him. Abraham and Sarah are the parents of this new nation. It is with them that God creates his covenant. Unfortunately, the Israelites are not faithful to God's covenant and a pattern develops between the King and his people, a cycle of sin, where (1) his people turn away from him, (2) he rebukes and corrects them, (3) they realize their error and turn back to him, and (4) he restores them. Then, unfortunately, the would begin again for more faithless rebellion. It was a vicious cycle and things kept getting worse, both with the sin and with the punishment.

One episode provides a telling example and helps us to understand how God works. In 1 Samuel 8 we read the story about the Israelites asking God to give them a human king, one who could stand before them and lead them. (We alluded to this in the last act.) Up until that point, God acted as their King, but having God as your King was very demanding business. Before granting their request God warned that a human king would not really provide them with peace and justice they wanted; instead he would do things to build himself up — at their expense. Their decision brought them untold suffering, as their kings led them away from the Lord and oppressed them exactly as promised. Therefore, they couldn't be the people that God intended; they couldn't be faithful to him and thus bring his blessing and salvation to the world. They couldn't be the means through which God would heal the fallen world. Their kings led them away from God rather than toward him.

The situation, however, wasn't hopeless. God is in the redemption business after all. Even in the midst of their rebellion, God was making promises that he would still bring his salvation through them; he would still fulfill his promises; he would still work through them. He would even use this institution of the king, which God had advised against but that the people had demanded. That is just the way God works. He takes our worst

decisions and works them for his good, a comforting truth for all who feel the pang of regret over bad decisions and even worse consequences. How would God accomplish all this? He would send a new King, a true King.

## **What Was the King to Do?**

The king that the Israelites got, to take God's place, was named Saul. He was succeeded by King David, the best and most faithful king that Israel had. After him the quality of the kings, as measured by their obedience to God, went downhill, sometimes faster, somethings slower, but down nevertheless. Yet, before any of that happened, God spoke words of promise to King David.

*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. (2 Sam 7:12-14)*

As Israel's failure to be God's faithful people became clearer and clearer, it became clearer and clearer that there must be another way, another way that could only be made possible by God.

The new way was going to be walked by God's Messiah. This Messiah in David's line was going to do two things: 1) he was going to return to Zion, to Jerusalem and restore the temple, and 2) he was going to fight a decisive battle against Israel's enemies. In fact, in looking back, David's first act after being anointed was to fight Goliath, Israel's great enemy, while his last was to plan the building of God's Temple.

And so we see Jesus acting both of these out during the Triumphal Entry that we celebrate on Palm Sunday. This was when Jesus entered Jerusalem with a kingly welcome; the King returning to Zion. Jesus then goes to the Temple and he casts out the money-changers, and cleanses the temple. But these things are still a foreshadowing. The real event came when Jesus mounted the cross.

It was on the cross that Jesus truly cleansed the Temple. Or as he himself foretold, "I will destroy this temple and restore it in three days." For the only way to cleanse the human temple was to utterly wipe it out and destroy it. He of course wasn't talking about the stone and wood, but his body. And the enemy of Israel that he defeated there was not Rome, but human sin, guilt and ultimately death.

So when Jesus hung on that cross, he was fulfilling a role and calling that had been laid out, not only centuries before, but before the foundation of the world, to be God for us. As Jesus came to earth and finally came to Jerusalem, it was none other than the King of the Universe, stepping in to his fallen creation to reestablish his order. The King was establishing his kingdom, asserting his position and power. The enemy that he defeated was the rebellion of sin and its horrific consequences. As a good king, Jesus brought justice by condemning sin, only it was he himself for bore its death sentence on the cross. He substituted himself for us. To more fully understand this, it is helpful to study Christ not just as King, but also as Priest, which is laid out in the book of Hebrews.

A first century observer of his crucifixion without any other knowledge would have been quite perplexed. But when placed in the long arc of God's story with the world, it is clear that what was happening on the cross was God's reconciliation with the world. He had stepped into the space and time of his creation in order to set things right, to reestablish the order that pertained before the Fall, when his creations obeyed him, worked with him, and were in complete fellowship with one another.

## **So what?**

What is the appropriate response for us, as we understand that Jesus is the true King? In a word, submit. Our highest calling is to follow and obey the king, to live and work for his kingdom, to claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, to admit and acknowledge that we are the rebels who have thrown off his rule, wanting to rule ourselves. He offers us the hand of peace if we will only lay down our arms, and swear our allegiance as his humbled and undeserving subjects. If we will, he offers us his amnesty, for he has already paid the price for our sin. All hail the King!

## Church

### Spreading the News of the King

#### **You're Weird**

The average congregation is just plain weird. I don't mean it is full of weird people. I am talking about what Christians do when they gather together for worship. Imagine you are taken from your home, which happens to be a yurt on the Mongolian steppes. One minute you are milking your yak and then next minute you are in church. Or, better yet, you have grown up in France and have seen the old churches, one minute imagining that no enlightened person could take religion seriously while the next find yourself in an American church. Surely it would strike you as quite odd. How would you categorize this group? Is it a club, a civic group, or something else? Even Americans have different ideas. Is going to the church like going to movie or a concert, where you judge it by whether or not you were moved or encouraged and even wowed? Or is going to church like going to social club where you mix with people like you? Or is going to church like going to a civic organization where you do volunteer work?

Sometimes even churches get confused. I saw a comic of a preacher at a pulpit who was saying, "I want to thank Mrs. Smith and the drama team for that rousing presentation, and Stan, that laser show was wonderful! Now, turn with me in your Bible for a brief word from our Sponsor."

While different people have different ideas, let's look at what the Bible says.

#### **A New Israel**

1 Peter 2 is a great help in understanding just what the church is supposed to be. In it the author uses language taken right out of the Old Testament, from Exodus 19, which we read earlier.

*9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's*

*people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. 13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. For them to do what God has called them to do, they need to understand who God has made them to be. But these are peculiar words to use. If I said that you were a royal priesthood or holy nation, would that change your life? I'm betting not.

But, if you were a Jew, you would recognize these words immediately. Way back in Exodus 19, just after God brings this rag-tag group of ex-slaves out of Egypt, God tells Moses to say to the Israelites.

*4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." 7*

They are not just a group of individuals that are trying to make their way through life, like groping in the dark. They have been brought together by God. God is the one who called them together as a people, has given them a name and an identity. More than that, he has given them a purpose, a life-changing, world-altering purpose. To be a priestly kingdom means that they will act as a go-between between God and the nations. That they are called to be holy means that they are called to be different. They are to stand out and be different, in a good way.

In the New Testament, Peter is applying this to us, the church. The church is not a club or civic organization. It's not meant to be a form of diversion or entertainment. The church is nothing less than God's people, the new Israel. As he writes in verse 10, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." We are connected to one another.

And this thing called church is God's idea. He is the one who calls it together. It is never we who set out to find God, it is always he who by his Spirit draws us to him. We are his people. We belong to him. He is our leader and our Lord. But he brings us together for a purpose. We have a goal that is larger than ourselves. In verse 9 he writes,

*God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

God has called us out of the world to bear witness to what he has done. We are to be a mirror to reflect his glory to the nations. Remember, this is what Israel was called to do. They were supposed to be bearers of God's blessing to the world. But they tried to hold onto those blessings for themselves. They forgot about the responsibilities of God's blessings. This is what Tom talked about a couple of weeks ago.

Peter goes on to say that Christians are to pay attention to how they live. And to live in such a way that outsiders will look out our lifestyles and end up turning to God. He says that they should give the government it's due. And sums up, 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. All of this is so that the world may see that Christ makes a difference in our lives. And that they will want that difference in their lives.

I know that the word Evangelism is enough to freak people out. But the church exists to spread the good news to the world that it's King, the maker of heaven and earth, has come to earth to condemn our rebellion and to reconcile us with him. Our job is not to make people follow him. We might do better to think of our job as *introducing* people to Jesus. Think about how non-threatening an introduction is. You are talking with one acquaintance when another comes up, and you say, "Hey, Mary, do you know Mike? No. Mary, this is Mike. Mike, this is Mary." It's the same. "Hey Bob, Do you know Jesus? No? Well then let me introduce you to someone that changed my life." How they respond is totally up to them.

The story of the Bible begins with the creation of the universe. But God's creatures rebelled. It was Israel's role to bring God's blessing and salvation to the world. And even

though they failed, there were all of these seeds that were planted in their history which bore fruit in Christ. Jesus retraced their steps and where they failed, he got it right. Now, we are continuing his work. The difference between us and Israel is that we have been given the Holy Spirit.

## **Holy Spirit**

In Acts 2, Jesus' disciples are huddled together after Jesus' ascension, they don't really know what to do next, until the Holy Spirit falls upon them and their lives are ignited. The story of the early church is recorded in the books of Acts and it is the story of expansion. Persecution pushes them out from Jerusalem, to the surrounding area of Judea, to the Gentile area of Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the Roman world. So, if you were to picture it, you start out with the widest possible scope with all creation and humanity, which is also tainted by the sin. So God creates Israel, this subset of people, to use. But God's purpose is always for the whole world. That is never lost from view. With Jesus it is all boiled down to one man, who is at the same time God, who is going to set the world right. It is all compressed in Jesus, then it explodes outward to the whole world, like a fusion reaction that fuels the sun. And it will continue outward until it includes the whole world. This is the story of the world. This story is also our story.

## **The Story Is Our Story**

We are made to live in a story. To talk about your story is to talk about your hopes and dreams. Like "get married, have kids and live happily ever after." Or "graduate from college, get a high paying job, and live happily ever after." These are the stories we try to live by. In fact, I would say that a mid-life crisis is what happens when you try to live without a story, or within a too-small story, that shrinks life down to making money and raising kids. Life is bigger than that.

As Christians, we have the biggest and greatest story of all. It is the story of the whole world. It encompasses the creation of the world, as well as the end of the world, and

culmination of all things. More importantly it is the story of the world's creator. It is God's story. The story reveals his character as he holds off the forces of sin, death, sorry and suffering. And it's not just his story, it's our story. We have a main part in the story. We are not just extras, like Bystander #3. We are caught up in the action and our decisions affect the plot of the story. We matter because this big story of God is also our story. This is why it is not only an adventure story, but also a love story. It is the story of God's love for the world and God's love for us. It is because God loves us that he includes us in his story. Presbyterian pastor and author Eugene Peterson has written some great words,

*When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we're being led not to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.*

- Peterson, the Invitation, p. 11.

The fact that God takes us up into his story is the greatest honor. Without it, we are not a people. Without it, we don't have a purpose. But with it our lives have the greatest meaning.

## **Group of Mothers Makes Big Impact on Gang War Zone**

So what we are called to do is to get to know this story. To live in it. And then to live it out.

James Bryan Smith is a seminary professor in Kansas that shared a challenging story in a recent book. He writes,

*In the early 1990s, gang violence erupted in Boyle Heights, a section of East Los Angeles. Eight gangs were in conflict in the parish around the Dolores Mission Catholic Church. Killings and injuries happened daily. A group of women who met for prayer read together the story of Jesus walking on water .... Then one of the mothers, electrified by the text, began to identify the parallels between the Jesus story and her own....*

*That night, seventy women began ... a procession from one barrio to another. They brought food, guitars, and love. As they ate chips and salsa and drank Cokes with gang members, [they began to sing traditional songs together]. The gangs were disoriented, baffled; the war zones were silent.*

*Each night the mothers walked. By nonviolently intruding and intervening, they*

*"broke the rules of war." The old script of retaliation and escalating violence was challenged and changed. It is no accident that the women christened their nighttime journeys "love walks."*

*As the relationships between the women and the gang members grew, the kids told their stories. Anguish over lack of jobs; anger at police brutality; rage over the hopelessness of poverty. Together they developed a tortilla factory, a bakery, a child-care center, a job-training program, a class on conflict-resolution techniques, a school for further learning, a neighborhood group to monitor and report police misbehavior, and more.*

*And it began with the challenge "Get out of the boat" and "walk on water."*

James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 131-132

They lived out a different story and it changed the world. This is what every Christian is called to do. This is why it is so important to learn the story of the Bible — because it is the true story of the world — and then to live it out. In so much as we do, guided by the Spirit, we will change the world for the better.

## Last Things

### The Return of the King

#### Spoiler Alert

I need to begin this Act with a warning, a disclaimer, a spoiler alert actually. I am about to tell you how the story ends. So, if you are the kind of person that likes surprises then you might want to stop reading. It seems to me that it's nothing something that we give a lot of thought to: the fact that we know how the story of the world ends. With all of the uncertainty in our lives, never knowing what the next week or even the next week will bring, we still know how it's all going to end up. In John 14, Jesus says to his followers,

*1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*

At the end Jesus will return and will gather his children to himself. The Bible's teachings on these things are called Eschatology. You might have heard that word before, but it just means 'last things.'

Notice that I said HOW, not WHEN. So much time has been wasted focusing on the wrong question!

#### Wrong Predictions of the End

For centuries there have been innumerable theories as to when and how the world might end. Here are some highlights gleaned from alleged prophecies:

In 960 Bernard of Thuringia, a German theologian, calculated 992 as the most likely year for the world's end. As the time approached, panic was widespread.

German astrologer Johann Stöffler predicted an overwhelming flood on February 20, 1524. Believers started constructing arks. One man is said to have been trampled to death by a

mob attempting to board his specially built vessel. When nothing happened, the calculations were revised and a new date given—1588. That year also passed without any unusual rainfall.

Solomon Eccles was jailed in London's Bridewell Prison in 1665 for striding through Smithfield Market, carrying a pan of blazing sulfur on his head, and proclaiming doom and destruction. Although the end of the world did not follow, the Great Fire of London did, in 1666.

After studying both the Bible and the mystical messages of the Great Pyramid, in 1874 Charles Taze Russell, founder of the sect that became Jehovah's Witnesses, concluded that the Second Coming had already taken place. He declared that people had 40 years, or until 1914, to enter his faith or be destroyed. Later he modified the date to "very soon after 1914."

Herbert W. Armstrong, publisher of the magazine "The Plain Truth," declared that January 7, 1972, was undoubtedly the date to watch. The utter failure of his prediction did not diminish his zeal.

Adapted from "Facts and Fallacies," Reader's Digest (1988)

This is what keeps me from paying much attention when people get so excited by whatever signs they see that say that the end is year. It might be as soon as today for all anybody knows, so we should indeed be fervent and not apathetic about our faith. But we have not been given the when. But it is enough to know that this is the end.

## **Revelation 21**

We should pay attention to what we have been given, so I want to read Revelation 21, the second to last chapter of the Bible.

*1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of*

*God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

*22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (NRSV)*

## **Finishing the story**

Some have summarized the story of the Bible as the journey from the garden to the city, and you can now see why. We began in the garden of Eden, an environment created by God. We end in a city, which is a human-made environment. Cities are not usually held up as examples of righteousness. More often they are given as examples of human evil, of crime, greed, lust, and on and on. But here we have a city at the end of all things. Consider the importance of this picture of redemption: God takes the products of our hands and, while they can be used for evil, redeems them by using them for his good purposes and his glory.

This is a perfect summary of where the story is heading. We have emphasized from the beginning that God's intention has always been the redemption and restoration of all of creation. "For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever trusts in him will have eternal life." God doesn't just love and redeem the "spiritual" parts.

In the middle of the city, where a Jew would expect to find the Temple, the symbol of God's presence and the means of connecting with him, John sees no temple. The reason that there is no temple is that Jesus fulfilled that role. He has done perfectly what the temple could only do partially. Now God dwells there. There is no go between or middle man between God and the world that he was made. There is nothing to get in the way

between God and his people. What is it like in this place?

*"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

This text points back past the Old Testament temple. It points back beyond the fall. It actually points back to where we started in Genesis 1. I was struck by the language and imagery of creation. It begins by talking about the heaven and the earth. It goes on to talk about light and darkness and the sun and the moon. But this time there is no need for the sun or the moon, because God is its light. God fills all. The relationship between God and his creatures has been fully restored. And the creatures have been fully restored. All the sorrow and sin have passed away.

## **So What?**

What difference does this teaching make in our lives? I think that it should do two things for us: it should bring us comfort and discomfort.

We are comforted because there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The world is filled with suffering. No one come out clean. Everyone will have dirt and grass stains on their uniform before it's over. Life is not fair. We all experience heartache and grief that we don't directly deserve. We labor under injustice. We are subject to powers and forces that are greater than ourselves. Nevertheless, we can continue because we have hope. We can persevere because we know that the suffering will end. We refuse to give up because we know that no matter how great the evil or violence and suffering, God can take and redeem it. And the life that we will leave after we die is infinite. No matter how great our suffering seems to us now, it will seem like a blink of an eye in the light of eternity. So be comforted by these words and comfort others with these words.

This is why the story is good news. Let's rehearse the story one last time before going on to see how the truth at the end of the world is also there to make us uncomfortable.

## **The Story of the Scripture in 6 Acts**

God, the King of the Universe, creates a wonderful Kingdom, which we call the world. It is full of beauty, order, truth, and goodness. Everything is subject to his loving rule and his caring concern. Humans were in a great relationship with the King, as well as with one another and the rest of the world that God made.

But soon, they decided that they didn't want to be under his rule. They wanted to decide for themselves what was good and right. Therefore, they rebelled against his rule and went their own way. This is really what we mean by the big word, sin, living like we want to live, rather than the way that God designed us to. And there were consequences, broken relationships, guilt, oppression, exploitation, and deceit.

Facing the mass rebellion in the Kingdom, the King creates a new people within the world, to be his faithful people, and through which the rest of Creation will be reconciled to him. Unfortunately, the Israelites are not faithful and a pattern develops between the King and his people, a cycle of sin, where his people turn away from him, he rebukes them, they realize their error and turn back to him, and he restores them — only to have the cycle begin again.

Finally, the King does what only the King can do. He comes in person. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, comes and lives and dies on behalf of his people. By the Spirit he is resurrected and his eternal reign is established on the earth. The seeds of redemption have been sown and his power and influence spread.

While on earth, the King created a new people, which came to be known as the church. This new people lives under his authority and trusts in him. They have been given the task of spreading the news of the King's victory and to invite everyone to submit once again to his loving care.

Before he ascended to heaven, he promised that he would come again. When the King comes back, he will restore all the world to his original intention, and all will be in harmony with one another, and with the King.

This last Act is so important. Because when we look at our lives and we look at the world,

we see all of the brokenness and the evil and the sin. And, even though Jesus has come, the world is not yet fixed. And so, as we said, these last Act gives us comfort, for Jesus will bring us home.

But I said that it should also bring us discomfort. To see what I mean, listen again to these words from verse 3,

*"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

Doesn't your heart just long for that? God will be our home. What could be nearer and dearer to our hearts than home? Home is that place of harbor, of refuge, the place where we are safe, the place that we recharge. We should want to go home.

### **Little Boy Just Wants to Go Home**

Wanda Vassalo of Dallas, Texas, told the story of her friend Linda, who teaches first grade, and a boy named Ryan on his first day of school. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, Ryan was getting his things ready to leave for home when he was actually supposed to be heading to lunch with the rest of the class. Linda asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. Linda tried to explain that, now that he is in the first grade, he would have a longer school day. "You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home." Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Convinced of her seriousness, Ryan then put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

As believers, it's easy to feel a little like Ryan when we consider the Christian life. The requirements are daunting. You can easily hear these objections:

- Surely the Lord doesn't expect me to forgive seventy times seven.
- Surely he doesn't want me to turn the other cheek when someone hurts me.
- What does he mean, 'take up my cross'?"

It isn't long before you want to say, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

There is a song that goes, "This world is not my home, I am just a passing through." That is real Christian truth. We were made to live our lives in God. And the problem is that we try too much to make our homes here. Those, like me, who live in suburbia are especially prone to this. Our kids have every toy. Our houses have every convenience and comfort. And we justify it because we NEED these things. Or everyone has them, or whatever.

What these texts try to do is to make us long for how things will be, so that we don't get too comfortable in the here and now. For as Jesus warns, "What do you benefit if you gain the whole world and yet lose your soul?" No comfort that we seek here will last. It will never fill us up. It will not satisfy us or quench our fears or our suffering.

We need to hunger and thirst for God and for the wholeness that is found in him. We can't settle for anything less than God.

Millions of Christians pray the Lord's prayer every week, saying the words, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done." That is, God, let your kingdom come to the earth and in my life. Let your will be done in and through me. Let me live the eternal life, starting right now! I am broken and I will not be whole until you come to me.

The knowledge of the future that awaits us is so marvelous that it should make us dissatisfied with the comforts of this life. It aims to lift up our eyes to God so that we don't get too content now. Knowing the end of the story should make us long for our true end and purpose: to live with God and know him, even as we are fully known.

There is no better way to conclude the story of the Bible than with the last words from the Bible. They hold the promise and the prayer for our lives as we live out this story.

*The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen. — John 21:20-21*