

The Best Story Ever

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We are here to proclaim the good news about Jesus so that God will be glorified and people will be changed forever.

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Introduction

I like stories.

I have been listening to stories, reading stories, and telling stories pretty much all my life.

Id like to tell you my favorite one.

It is my favorite because it is the most fascinating.

There are some stories you only need to hear once. This story actually becomes more interesting the more you read it. It is not only interesting, though. It is transforming. It changes people. I know that because it changed me. And it is not just me that it is changing. This story has changed thousands of other peoples lives as well. What is even more important is the fact that it is true. I am not making this story up. I couldn't. And, really, it wouldn't be a very good story if I had. This story is only important and transforming because it is true. And I know it is true because it is not my story. It is God's.

I want to tell you the true story of the universe.

We find this story in God's book, the Bible.

This is the story He's written to help us answer the most important questions in life:

Where did everything come from? Who are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose? What is wrong with this world? And what is the solution?

I told you this story was important! This is the story of everything that matters most.

To Think About

1. Do you think a story can change a person? Why or why not?
2. What is the story this booklet is going to tell?
3. Why are the questions this story answers so important? What are your answers right now to those questions?

Chapter 1: Before the Beginning

Most stories begin at the beginning. This story starts way before that. Maybe you can try to imagine something. Actually, let me rephrase that. Imagine nothing. No people, no houses, no cars, no trees, no rivers, no planets, nothing.

Nothing but God, that is.

It is pretty hard to imagine nothing, isn't it? We all came from somewhere. Everything we see came from something. But God didn't. He's always existed. There never was a time when God was not.

The Bible describes Him as the everlasting God. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Psalm 90:2)."

And this everlasting God who existed before anything and everything else, was happy. He was absolutely and completely happy all by Himself. You see, God does not need anything outside of God to make Him happy. After all, "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs – for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need" (Acts 17:24-25).

Sometimes people think God created the world because He was lonely. You or I would be pretty lonely if it were just us. But God is bigger and better than any one of us. He eternally exists as one God in three persons. These three persons have always had perfect delight and communion with one another. If we somehow travelled back in time before there was anything anywhere but God, we would see God the Father happily loving God the Son through and with God the Spirit.

There's no one in the universe as beautiful as God. It is not surprising then that God has eternally enjoyed seeing His perfections put on display and because the display of His perfections is such a great good in and of itself, He decided to make Himself look great by creating a universe in which His glory could be seen and enjoyed by others as well. The Bible begins with an eternally happy God choosing to make Himself look great by putting His love and other attributes on display. Perhaps you might think of God as being a little like a fountain. He is a fountain of goodness and greatness and glory. And what do fountains do? They overflow. God the fountain of goodness overflowed into the creation of a universe and people for Himself.

That is why everything exists. Everything exists for God. Even you.

While you and I are a part of the story God is writing in this universe, this story is mainly about someone much better, much more significant, and much more fascinating than us.

This is a story about God.

To Think About

1. What was God doing before the beginning of the universe?
2. Why did God create the universe?
3. What difference do you think it makes that everything is about God?

Chapter 2: A Beautiful Creation

The first chapter of the first book of the Bible describes how God created what's on the earth. But we know from other parts of the Bible that God also created what's in heaven. For example, the angels. Angels are spirit beings who were created to be God's servants.¹

We don't know exactly when God created these angelic beings, but I think it must have been before He created much of everything else because Job 38:7 describes them as shouting for joy as they watched God create everything we see in the universe.

God's Creating the World Shows His Power

It is easy to understand why these angelic beings were shouting for joy at creation. After all, think about the way God created the universe. He did it with just a word, out of nothing.

We sometimes take God's creation of the world for granted. But really! What would you say if I told you I wanted you to build a house and you weren't allowed to use any materials to build it? You would say I was crazy. You can shout, "Let there be a house!" all you want but nothing will happen, no matter how loudly you shout. God demonstrates His absolute control over everything by simply saying, "Let there be light," and there is light; and, "Let there be an ocean," and there the ocean is; and, "Let there be stars," and there are stars. Creating whole universes is not difficult for God.

God's Creating Everything Shows His Ownership

Since God created everything, He owns everything. The Bible says it like

1. Nehemiah 9:6 tells us what happened: 'You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host.'

this: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). But even though everything belongs to Him, God is generous. He shows that generosity even in the way He created the world. He created all these things for a purpose and part of that purpose was to bring us delight as human beings.

Human beings are special to God. I know sometimes people talk about humans as if they were merely another kind of animal. It is strange that people desperately want to be the same as all the other animals, because it is so obvious we aren't. God has a unique plan for us as humans.

One place we discover that plan is in the very first chapter of the Bible. As we read the first chapter of Genesis we see humans are much more than another animal to God because everything in this first chapter leads up to God's creation of human beings.

While the uniqueness of being human may seem obvious to us, it is not as obvious to many people. I remember asking a group of people to explain the difference between humans and dogs. Surprisingly it took them a little while to come up with an answer. Finally they said things like dogs bark and we talk, dogs walk on four legs and we walk on two. While there are all kinds of differences like that, there is one difference that is more fundamental. Humans were created in the image of God and animals were not.

God's Creation of Man Shows Our Uniqueness

When God made man, He said something very important: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The word "likeness" shows us that humans have a special relationship with God. The word "image" tells us people were created to play a special role in the universe. Humans have a special relationship with God and a special status in the world.

Apparently, in the ancient world, kings would sometimes set up a statue (a likeness, an image) of themselves in certain places to proclaim that they were ruling over the area where that statue was placed. In a similar way, God placed a man and a woman in the middle of creation to function as something like His statue. Men were to be reminders that God is King of creation and to serve as God's managers over that creation. They were to be servants through which God would exercise His rule.

What a privilege! Think about what life must have been like for the first two humans God made. The world was perfect! No pain, no suffering, no fighting, no problems, only love. There was no hiding, no guilt, no shame, no sin. Best of all, their relationship with God was perfect. They walked and talked with Him the way you would a friend.

One way God showed His love for them was by making a very special place for them to spend time with Him and to worship Him. The Bible describes this place as the Garden of Eden. This was a place where humans could meet with God. Some people describe it as being the first temple. It was a sanctuary where people could enjoy God's special presence. God was going to fill His earth with people who would know and enjoy Him, reflect

His character, and expand His kingdom. He was going to fill the earth with worshipers.

Only One Rule

In the middle of all this kindness, God gave humans only one rule to follow. Now, we don't always like rules. The word even sounds a bit hard to us. But if we stop and think for a moment, we know that's not necessarily true. Rules can be good for us. Even as parents we give our children rules because we love them. Fortunately, this rule God gave humans was fairly easy to obey. He told them they must not eat of one particular tree in the garden. To make sure they knew how serious He was about this command, He warned them of the consequences of disobedience. God did not give them this rule because He was stingy or unkind. They were able to eat of every other tree in the whole world. And since they were the only people on the planet, it wasn't like there was a lot of competition for food. God gave them this rule because He wanted them to learn to trust Him and obey Him as His servants. Adam and Eve would learn the joy of living in dependence on God's Word by submitting to what He commanded.

But of course, we now know, they didn't.

To Think About

1. What is amazing about the fact that God created the world with a word?
2. How are humans unlike animals? Why is that significant?
3. How did God's creation of man show His goodness?
4. What was the one rule God gave man? Was it hard to follow? Why did God give this command to them?

As the angels watched God create the world, many of them were re-

Chapter 3: A Big Mess

joicing as God poured out His lavish love on people (Job 38:7). But not all of them. At some point there was some kind of rebellion amongst the angelic beings. I say some point and some kind because the Bible doesn't give us a whole lot of information about it, actually.

While we don't know much, what we do know is that this rebellion was led by an angel whom we now call Satan. When God first created the world He saw that everything He created was good, but not long afterwards, this angel Satan led an angelic revolt against God. The result of this revolt was that Satan and these other angels whom we now call demons were cast out of the glory of God's presence.

Having been cast out of God's presence, Satan decided to wage war on God by waging war on God's creation. Perhaps because he was jealous of God's generosity to man, Satan entered into that creation in the form of a snake shortly after man was created.

The Great Deception

Perhaps one reason he came to Eve as a snake was because he had such a difficult job to do. He needed all the advantages he could get. After all, Satan wanted to fool Eve into thinking that God wasn't really all that good. I am sure if he told his plan to the other demons before he executed it, they would have thought he was crazy. God had created this amazing world and had constantly sought man's best! How could Satan ever deceive humans into thinking bad thoughts about God? And yet, he did. Approaching the woman in the Garden of Eden, he attacks God's Word and God's character and amazingly, first Eve and then Adam listen. They shake their fists at God and do what Satan suggests: they eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. I

understand that eating this fruit may seem like a small thing.

But there was more going on here than Adam and Eve eating something they shouldn't have. Adam and Eve were representing the rest of us and as our representatives, they were saying to God, "We do not want you to be our king. We want to be our own lord and master."

If you want to understand the problems in this world, you have to understand this. God made humans for Himself, but the humans walked out on God. People replaced God's purpose for the world with their own. Instead of gladly worshipping God, humans chose to worship themselves.

A Devastating Choice

This act of rebellion sent shockwaves throughout the whole creation.

It destroyed the relationship Adam and Eve had with God and the relationship their descendants would have with God as well. One of the most tragic consequences of Adam and Eve's sin is that men and women are now born as enemies of God. We often find people asking questions like, "Why can't we see God?" or "Why are there all these different ideas of God?" We are sometimes confronted with people who hate God or do not believe in God, and the reason for all of that begins here with the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

God said, "If you eat, you will die," and they did die – spiritually. Spiritual death entered the world through Adam's sin. The apostle Paul explains it like this in Romans 1:18ff: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

Their sin also had a devastating impact on everything else in creation. This world came under God's curse and is now enslaved to corruption. That is why life in this world is so hard and painful. It is a little like we are living in a war zone. The way things were before the fall could be characterized by the word "life," but the way things are now after the fall can be characterized by the word "death."

Their rebellion also impacted man's relationship with one other. People have been having problems in their relationship with one another ever since man turned his back on God. (We find right away after the story of man's rebellion against God a story about the very first brothers. If you are familiar with your Bible, you know as well as I do that this story is not one of brotherly love, but of brotherly hate.)

We sometimes think of disobedience to God's law as a small thing. When we think like that we are closing our eyes to reality. God has made it very obvious that disobedience is a very big deal. All we have to do is look at the problems in the world around us to see that. All our problems are ultimately a result of humankind's refusal to submit to God's authority over him. People wanting to be their own masters broke this world and broke it badly.

To Think About

1. What are some reasons it should have been difficult for Satan to tempt Eve?
2. Why was Adam and Eve's decision to eat the fruit such a big deal?
3. What were the consequences of their decision to disobey God?

Chapter 4: Some Really Bad News

Have you ever broken something valuable? If what you broke belonged to someone else, you know the sinking feeling you get in your stomach as you worry about how they are going to respond when they find out.

Imagine how Adam and Eve must have felt after breaking God's good world.

They ignored God's good plans. And they broke all the beautiful things God had created for their good. They broke their relationship with Him. They broke the creation. They broke their relationship with one another.

How would God respond to man's rebellion?

God responds to what they have done in judgment.

Now, some people don't take God's judgment very seriously. In fact, I sometimes ask people how they think the problem of their sin can be fixed and they respond by saying that God should just forgive it. But, really? Would that be just? If someone murders your child and goes to the judge and asks for forgiveness and the judge responds by granting forgiveness and declaring that person innocent, you and I both know that's not just at all. That's not a good judge. That's a bad one.

God has to punish sin to be a good judge.

And He does just that by casting Adam and Eve out of the Garden and He gives them specific consequences for their sin. But even in the middle of His judgment God shows mercy. He makes a promise that the seed of the woman one day will crush the head of the serpent. This is remarkable! We find a promise of salvation even in the middle of this declaration of judgment and this will become what many think is the theme of the entire Bible: God glorifying Himself through showing mercy to sinners and through judging sin.

Shortly after this expression of kindness, humans once again prove how much they deserve judgment. Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother Abel, and after that, things go from bad to worse. It is not long after the creation of the world that God looks at man and sees that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

Only Evil Continually

Most of us like to think of ourselves as good. If we are going to be really humble, we might think of ourselves as neutral. We think if God left us to ourselves we would run to Him. If we did not exactly run towards Him, we would be open to a relationship with Him. But that's just not true. We are born running as fast as we can away from the one true God. We will do everything in our power to avoid a real relationship with Him.

If you don't believe me, think about what happens in the very beginning of the Bible. After Adam and Eve sinned, God showed mercy. Yet in spite of His mercy, their descendants ran away from Him.

Things got so bad that God decided to wipe out everything that He had made. But again, He showed mercy. He chose to rescue Noah. In spite of all the wickedness in the world all around him, Noah was a righteous individual, and so God saved Noah, as He obliterated the rest of the world through a flood.

A Second Chance

Now, this is significant.

Have you ever thought about what would happen if God gave humans a second chance?

With Noah, He actually did. It was as if God gave the world a bath through the flood. Rain poured down and the whole earth was covered with water. It is as if God were cleaning up the world, hitting the restart button on the universe.

We had every advantage.

If ever humans were going to get it right, you would think this was their chance. God had given a clear demonstration of His justice and hatred of sin. Then in His grace He chooses the most righteous man on the earth and places him and his family in the middle of a beautiful, wonderful place without any other sinners around so that he could serve him and have a relationship with Him.

Would that be enough to fix things?

Unfortunately, we see the answer is definitely not. Not too long after Noah's boat hits dry ground we see exactly what would happen if God gave humans another shot. They start rebelling against God once again. They hate God so much, they come to the point where they basically say, "Let's not live for God's glory but rather for our own. And to make sure God doesn't get in our way, let's build a tower."

I think you may know what story I am talking about. We often call it the Tower of Babel. While we do not know everything that was going on with that tower, we do know they were building the tower because they thought it would enable them to be able to do what they wanted and not what God wanted for them.

Broken People in a Broken World

This world is broken because we are broken. We do not want God to be our king. We do not want to enjoy and worship God. We want to worship ourselves, and the result of all this rebellion is judgment.

Judgment for Adam and Eve. For the Serpent. For Satan. For the world in Noah's day. And for every unrepentant, disobedient sinner. As Paul puts it in Romans, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness." The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27 that it is "appointed for a man to die once, and after that comes judgment."

Face to Face with Reality

It is important that you come face to face with this reality. This is part of why these stories are told in the Bible. They help us understand how seriously God takes sin. People sometimes have a fairy tale view of themselves. In spite of how bad this world is, they talk about it as if it weren't really all that broken and they talk about themselves as if they were not really all that broken and as if, with just a little work, they could fix things and make everything right.

But you can't. I can't. We can't. None of us can. It is really pretty silly to think we could.

Do you really think we can fix the way man's rebellion against God has broken this universe? We can put Band-Aids on it, perhaps, but we can't stop the bleeding.

Do you really think we can fix the way humankind's rebellion against God has broken people's relationships with one another?

Every time we pick up a history book, every time we pick up a newspaper, we are reminded of humans' coldhearted brutality towards one another.

Do you really think we can fix the way humans' rebellion against God has broken our relationship with Him?

We have all done what Adam did. We have all said to God, "I do not want you to be my king." Maybe we haven't said that with our actual mouths, but we have definitely said it with our lives. If you have lied, you have said it. If you have gotten angry, you have said it. If you have been selfish, you have said it. You have all walked out on God, just like Adam did. Do you think you can fix that? You can't.

You just can't.

If God left you to yourself, you wouldn't even really want to fix your relationship with Him. We are all committed to doing exactly what these people in the first chapters of Genesis were doing, running away from God,

seeking to be our own god and trying to find ways to keep ourselves from having to do what God tells us, and we are absolutely destroying ourselves, our relationship with Him, our relationship with others, and our relationship with this world as a result.

To Think About

1. Why does God have to judge sin? What would it say about God if He didn't?
2. Why is this world broken?
3. What would your relationship with God be like if He just left you to fix things on your own?

God could have ended everything when humans first disobeyed Him. He had every right to.

Chapter 5: God Saves Sinners

But He didn't. Even as He judged humankind by sending Adam and Eve out of the garden, He made a promise that one of their descendants would come to put things right and fix what man has broken.

The whole rest of the Bible is a story of exactly how God keeps that promise.

Father Abraham

In Genesis 12:1-3 God chooses a man out of this whole mess of rebellious humanity for Himself. This man's name was Abram. God makes a promise to Abram that will shape everything else that happens in the course of history. He promises to make this man a great nation, to give that nation land, to bless them and to extend His blessing to everyone else through that nation.

This promise seemed really unlikely. Abram and his wife were already very old. They had no children. Perhaps, God designed it that way to show us that there's no way Abram could do this on his own. It seemed so impossible when Abram's wife Sarah heard about it, she laughed. She thought it must be a joke. But of course it was not. God is the creator. He spoke and a universe came into being. When He says something will happen it will happen, no matter how impossible it looks to us, which is why, after some ups and downs and lessons in trusting God, Abram and Sarah had a son. His name was Isaac. He had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had a son named Joseph, and Joseph was so special to Jacob that even though he was one of his youngest sons, Jacob treated him like he was the eldest.

This made his brothers mad, of course, so they sold him to a bunch of slave traders. But this doesn't end so badly: Joseph became a slave to one of the most important men in Egypt. Only, his master's wife saw how good

looking he was and wanted to sleep with him. When Joseph refused, she got upset and had her husband send Joseph to prison. This again seemed like really bad news for Joseph, but ultimately it wasn't – in prison, Joseph met someone who knew the Pharaoh (the king of Egypt). God used this opportunity to introduce Joseph to the Pharaoh, who put Joseph second in charge of all of Egypt.

Being given that kind of responsibility is exciting in and of itself, but it was more than just an honor for Joseph. Back where Jacob and the rest of Joseph's family were living, there was a famine. This famine was a big problem, because if Joseph's family died, how would God keep His promise to Abraham to bless the entire world through his family? But of course, God used the terrible things that happened to Joseph as part of His great salvation plan. When Jacob's sons came to Egypt to ask for help, they found their brother Joseph in charge of handing out the food. This story at the beginning of the Bible sets the stage for the way that God goes about fixing what man has messed up throughout the rest of the Scriptures. While things seem to be spiraling out of control, like they were for Joseph when he was sold into slavery, God is actually right in the middle of the chaos, working out His plan to keep His promise.

He promised to make Abraham into a great nation and He did. The descendants of Abraham were saved from famine. They came down to Egypt to be with Joseph. Once there, they thrived. They kept having children, to the point where there were so many of them that the Egyptians were scared that they were going to become too powerful. As a result, the Egyptians started really doing terrible things to them and they (the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham) ended up as slaves to the Egyptians. The Israelites, in their suffering, cried out to God, and God of course heard them, because He hadn't forgotten His promise. He sent an old man named Moses to free them from slavery, and He did this through a whole series of plagues that were intended to make it clear to everyone in Egypt that He alone was God. However, Pharaoh's heart was so hard to the idea of God telling him what to do that those plagues did not quite do the trick. God ended them with the most serious plague of all. He came in judgment and struck down every firstborn in every family in Egypt. This was to be a big reminder of how serious it is to not submit to God's rule and authority and to act like you were king instead.

Even in this judgment, God showed mercy and provided a way of escape. He told His people that if they would take a lamb and kill it and then smear its blood on their doorposts, the death of that lamb would be a substitute for that of their firstborn child and when God came in judgment, He would pass over that person's house. And so, there was a death in every house in Egypt that night. For those who didn't have any blood on their doors, it was the death of their firstborn. Those who had smeared the blood of the lamb on the door, God passed over. But there still had been a death, the death of a lamb, and so in the morning when the firstborn children of the Israelites woke up, they knew that they had been kept safe by the blood of the lamb.

As you can imagine, all these deaths finally hit the Pharaoh hard, and so he let these descendants of Abraham go. God delivered them and brought them to a mountain called Sinai, where He met with them, constituted them as a nation, a nation we call Israel, and He gave them a job to do.

A Kingdom of Priests

God rescued this nation Israel for a purpose.

They were to be the means through which He spread His blessing to all the nations of the world. As a nation, they were to function something like priests, representing God to the world and serving as a model of what God can do, attracting all peoples to God, showing the world the beauty of God's original design for life. But even a nation of people couldn't fix the universe. In fact, the Israelites were failing to fulfill God's design from the beginning. They had already turned from God to worship a God of their own making when Moses first came down from meeting with God to tell them all of this. In spite of the way God had revealed Himself to them, when God brought them to the land He had promised them, they wouldn't trust Him enough to actually do what He said. There, in what the Bible calls the wilderness, they failed to overcome temptation and they were judged as a result. God condemned the whole adult generation who had been rescued from Egypt to die in the wilderness. But He didn't give up on His promise. Forty years later, He did bring their children into the land He had promised. However, once God kept His promise through Joshua and brought them into the land, it only took one generation for them to walk out on God again and go their own way and try to rule over their own lives and destroy pretty much everything else in the process.

This all came to a climax when they came to God's representative at the time, a man whose name was Samuel, and told him they wanted to be like all the other nations and have a king rule over them. This was just another way of saying the same thing men had been saying all along and that is, "God, in spite of all your goodness, in spite of all your mercy, we do not want you to be our king." But what's so amazing about God is that even in the middle of this rebellion, He was still steadily working on His great salvation plan. He raised up a king for His people whose name was David. David was a great king and for a while you think he might be the One, the Savior, who could solve the problems of the Universe, but he too turned his back on God's rule. Yet while God's people were turning their backs on God, God didn't turn His back on them. He made David a promise in a book called 2 Samuel, chapter 7, that one of His descendants, a king in David's line, would be the one the world was waiting for, the one through whom God would fix everything.

To Think About

1. Where do we see the beginning of God's great salvation promise? What promise does God make?
2. Why did God rescue the nation of Israel?

Chapter 6: The Promised One

God had a plan to fix what humans messed up. We discover that plan throughout the first part of the Bible. First, we learn the seed of a woman will crush the head of the serpent. Then, we discover, God will bless the world through a descendant of Abraham. Next, the Savior will come from the nation of Israel. And finally, that He will be one in the line of David.

We also get more insights into how this salvation plan of God is going to work out. For example, we saw in the previous chapter that this PROMISED ONE would come to rule as an eternal King.

In spite of these gracious revelations and displays of God's great kindness, after David, things in Israel go from bad to worse. David's son Solomon built a beautiful temple, a new kind of garden of Eden you might say, for God's people to meet with Him, but Solomon ends up walking out on God and turning to foreign gods instead. His son Rehoboam is so foolish that he splits the nation in two.

From this time on, the two halves of the nation have their own kings. Neither one does a good job of being a showcase to the nations of God's glory. They have problems in their relationship with each other and with God. They push God's patience to the limit. God sends prophet after prophet telling them to repent and turn to Him, but they harden their hearts, and God judges them by expelling them from the land.

This gets the people's attention. Unfortunately it doesn't cause them to examine themselves but rather to question God and God's faithfulness to His promises.

It is as if they say to God, "God, I thought you said you were going to fix the world through us? What happened to your great salvation plan? Have

you given up for good?”

Of course we know He hadn't. He sends prophets to tell the Israelites so. They tell the Israelites that God's great salvation plan is bigger than they could possibly imagine. A prophet named Isaiah prophesies that a coming eternal King will enter this world like a servant and that this Servant King will do things only God can do, rescuing Israel from exile, restoring their relationship with God, with each other, and with all of creation as well. What Adam failed to do, what Noah failed to do, what Moses failed to do, what Israel failed to do, He would do perfectly and completely.

The Servant King

Israel has finally been allowed to return to their homeland by the end of the first part of the Bible, but they are living there under the rule of foreigners. They are desperately waiting for God to send the Servant King and keep His promise and make things right by fixing what humans have broken. They didn't always agree with each other on how God would do this, when He would do it, who would be the one through whom He would do it, but they all agreed that He would do it.

They waited about four hundred years. This was just about the same amount of time that they lived in Egypt before the Exodus, actually. And just when you might have thought it was time to give up hope, God stepped in once again, and raised up a prophet named John. He wore funny clothes and ate strange food and lived out in the desert and told everyone he met how they needed to get ready because God was about to keep His promise and send the Servant who would be the means through which God fixes everything that was broken in the world.

After being baptized by John, this man named Jesus, who people thought was the son of a carpenter, stepped up and said that He was the One. He said that in Him, the kingdom of God had come. He claimed to be the one who would crush the head of Satan, the king who would rule over God's people perfectly, the final answer to the problems in the universe. And throughout His life He did what no one else in the history of the universe had been able to do. He submitted Himself completely to God the Father's rule. He obeyed God perfectly even when tested by Satan. He showcased in Himself what it looks like when a man lives in absolute trusting dependence on God's Word. What's more, He demonstrated what it was like for us as people when God is king by defeating demons, curing sickness, and even overcoming death itself.

Who is this Man?

As you can imagine, with the kinds of things Jesus was doing, people started asking questions. If you read the gospels, you will see even his own followers looking at him and asking questions.

Like for example, who exactly are you?

The answer Jesus gives is profound, but it is not complicated. “Who

else do you know that has power over the sea, can make food for thousands from scraps, can forgive sins, and bring the dead to life?” Finally, as Jesus was about to leave the earth, the disciples said, “Show us the Father,” and Jesus said straight up, “If you have seen me, you have seen Him!”

For thousands of years, men have been breaking God's good creation and hardening their hearts every time God reaches down to them with grace. And what does God do in response? He steps in again. God the Father sends God the Son to actually become part of His creation. And here's what is so tragic. When God does that, do you know what people do? How do they respond to this astounding act of grace?

They hate God's authority so much that even when God comes to the people He's been preparing years and years for this moment in their hour of greatest need, they reject Him and they end up turning on Him so violently that they crucify Him on the cross.

Incredible.

But of course, if we have been following the way that God has been working His salvation plan out so far, it is no surprise to us that God is able, even in the midst of man's terrible rebellion, to accomplish exactly the good thing He was planning to do in the first place. He was going to provide an actual solution to the problems man had created. You see, God's not going to simply put a Band-Aid on the mess people have created, He's going to fix it completely and make it something better.

The followers of Jesus didn't understand this at first. In fact, they were shocked when He was crucified. They initially thought it meant that He couldn't be the promised Messiah. But the reason the disciples and pretty much everyone else were so surprised when this man they thought was the Messiah promised by the Old Testament was crucified, was because they imagined him first fixing the problems people had in their relationship with the world and in their relationship with one another, and quickly. What they didn't realize was that before God could fix all of that, He had to provide a solution to a deeper and more significant problem and that was the problem in their relationship with Him.

To Think About

1. What are some of the key elements we learn about God's rescue plan in the Old Testament?
2. What's happened to Israel by the end of the Old Testament? Did this mean God had forgotten His promise?
3. How is Jesus connected to the promises that were made in the Old Testament?
4. What questions did people ask when they saw what Jesus was doing? What is the answer Jesus gives?
5. Why were the followers of Jesus so confused when he was crucified?

Chapter 7: The Heart of the Good News

Man's biggest problem is sin. There is no other problem in the universe that even compares.

One reason sin is our biggest problem is because God is holy. He hates sin. And as Judge of the Universe, He will punish it. He has to.

If God didn't punish our sin, He would not be good. He would be evil. He can't forgive sin without doing something about its guilt. And what He did was to send His own Son into this world to live a perfect life and die a death He didn't deserve on the cross so that He could act as a substitute for guilty repentant sinners and take the punishment they deserve for the sins they had committed.

I mean, think about that. This is good news.

God the Father takes His anger and pours it on Jesus for the sins of those who put their faith in Him. On the cross, He treated Jesus as if He had lived their lives, so He could treat them as if they lived His.

That's what is happening on the cross. Have you ever wondered why Jesus died the way He died? He was acting as man's substitute, taking his punishment, dying in his place. There are actually many passages in the Bible that explain this because this whole idea is so important. 1 Peter 3:18 is one: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God..." 2 Corinthians 5:21 is another: "For our sake, He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Galatians 3:13-14 is one more: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles..."

It may seem obvious to us now what was happening at the cross. But for the people who were following Jesus, it didn't at first. They didn't understand what was happening with Jesus' death. They were so sure that Jesus was the Messiah God had sent to crush evil once and for all and restore things to how they were meant to be, right then, at that very moment, that they didn't really have a place for a Messiah who ended up getting murdered.

They thought his death was the end of their hopes. Three days later, they realized it was only the beginning. Some of them went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried and they discovered that he wasn't there. And a short while after that, He showed up, having defeated death, took them back to the Scriptures, and revealed to them all the promises they had been missing.

This changed everything for them. They begin carrying the message out, to everyone, everywhere, as fast as they could, explaining that it is through Jesus' death on the cross that God was beginning to accomplish His great plan to recover a lost and broken world. Jesus had taken the punishment guilty sinners deserved so that they might be forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God.

Taking the Message Out

You can see how this must have seemed like a crazy message to the people who first heard it. A crucified Jewish man was God? That this man was the hope of the entire universe and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises about the coming universal and eternal King? The apostles were not ashamed or embarrassed about the message God had given them to proclaim because they had seen Jesus after he had risen from the dead, and they knew that his defeat of death was only the beginning. It was evidence of a new day dawning. They carried this message out with no thought to their own lives, because before Jesus went into heaven to sit at the right hand of God, He commanded them that they were to go into all the world and proclaim His lordship and to make disciples of all men until He returns.

God the Father sent God the Holy Spirit to help them do that. The Holy Spirit arrived in an explosive way, enabling them to get a taste of the future restoration God has in store by temporarily fixing the language barrier that divides us as humans: the apostles were suddenly able to speak and proclaim the message in many different languages. God affirmed that the apostles and prophets were speaking His Word by enabling them to do miracles and healings and giving them the ability to cast out demons. Best of all, He saved people through the proclamation of the gospel and transformed them and made them part of the church.

The early believers began to see that God's plan is bigger than just saving Jews. And they started taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, as a result. No one played a bigger role in doing this than a former persecutor of the church named Saul. Maybe you know him better as Paul? Paul went on a number of journeys throughout the Roman Empire, founding churches and later writing a number of letters to those churches to help them learn how to

live for God until Jesus returns. We find these letters in the New Testament, and these letters continue to shape our lives today, helping us, too, to learn how to wait for our Savior and Lord.

I say wait, because He is coming back. That's part of His promise. God's not finished with His great redemption project yet. There's still one more part to the story the Bible tells. Creation, Fall, Salvation, Restoration. God made it, man broke it, God fixes it and the way that God intends to fix it is bigger than what we are seeing all around us, right now. He didn't die and rise again merely to forgive people their sins so that they could eventually die and go into the ground. What's more, He didn't only die and rise again to forgive people their sins and then take them to heaven afterwards. His saving work is even bigger and better than that. When Jesus rose from the dead, He conquered sin and its power and He promised He would come back and finish the work He began.

God the Father has appointed Jesus as judge of both the living and the dead. God has fixed a day on which He will return to judge the world through this man, Jesus. And we know that He will do that because He raised Him from the dead. Jesus will be revealed coming from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, and He will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey His gospel. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from His presence and the glory of His might; but that's not all He will do when He returns. He also will deal with the way in which sin has corrupted this world. The heavens will pass away and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and God will recreate a new heaven and a new earth on which His people will live.

Forever!

To Think About

1. What is man's biggest problem and why?
2. What was happening on the cross? Why did Jesus die the way He died?
3. The disciples were so disappointed when Jesus was crucified. What event took place that changed their attitude towards his death?
4. What are some reasons the disciples' message must have seemed so crazy at first to the people who heard it? Why did they carry this message out with no thought for their own lives?

Chapter 8: Where Everything Is Headed and How to Get There

God doesn't only tell us our history in the Bible. He also tells us our future.

He says in Revelation 21:5, "Behold I am making all things new...." In other words, God's going to set all things right. He's going to make this creation into what He meant it to be all along. As someone has said, "everything will be as it was in the beginning, but better."

His children will enjoy a completely restored relationship with Him. In 1 John 3:2, we read: 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.'

They are not going to age. They are not going to get sick. They are not going to die. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be any mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." Believers will live in a world of absolute love. Everyone in heaven will be thinking of everyone else's interests first. They will be joined together in perfect harmony. Revelation 7:9 says, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands..."

Sin will be judged. Unrepentant sinners will be cast out of God's presence forever. Revelation 20:11-15 says, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened,

which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. 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."

We will finally experience unending joy, peace and purpose. The world we dream of will be the world we live in. Isaiah 11:6-9, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

And the best part of this great plan of God's is that Christians will be with God forever. Revelation 22 says, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.' And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb... And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

Wow. Seriously!

Does it get better than that? I really love talking about this part of the story. It is difficult for me not to say too much. You can just see how beautiful God's plan is! He is in the process right now of making everything better than it was in the Garden of Eden.

God's Story of the Universe

Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. This is God's story of the universe.

This is the story that answers all our important questions. This is the story that explains where everything came from and how it all went wrong. This is the story that reveals whether there is any hope for people like us. This is the story that describes where absolutely everything in the universe is headed.

God had a great purpose for this creation, and for us: to experience His presence and worship and obey Him as King. But we sinned, rebelled, and instead of fulfilling God's purpose, substituted our own, to worship ourselves, and this rebellion had tragic consequences, making us dead to God and alive to sin, unable to fix what we had so tragically broken.

But God wouldn't leave it at that. He wouldn't let this world He created suffer forever. He had a plan to make Himself look great by sending a Savior to rescue His people and make His purpose for humankind possible again. "And," as someone has written, "here at the end of the story, we see that God will fulfill for man the purpose He planned at the very beginning. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we now through faith have the opportunity with all of creation to be completely renewed, to be with God forever, and to fulfill the purpose God had in mind all along."

You remember how I told you at the beginning that this was my favorite story? Now I hope you see why. It is fascinating, isn't it? But you know, it is more than just a fascinating story. It is also an announcement. And because of that, it would be wrong for me to end without calling on you to evaluate your life as to whether you are living in a way that matches up with what God's doing in this universe.

This is reality.

This is the history of the world that you are living in. This is the future of the world as we know it. And I want to ask you, I need to ask you, are you living right now in a way that matches up with it?

Are You Out of Touch?

I am afraid some of you may be doing exactly what Adam and Eve were doing way back at the beginning. You are living as if you were your own king. You are thinking about yourself as if you were the center of the universe. You are looking to yourself or some other created thing as the solution to the problems of the universe.

While that may not seem like such a big deal to you at first, it really is. I wonder if you know what doing that is called? Looking to yourself or another created thing for your identity, for your purpose, to fix what's wrong in your life, in the world around you and in your relationships, is called idolatry.

And God hates it, which, honestly, I think you can understand. After all, it is only reasonable. Imagine your wife pretending someone other than you was her real husband. I am guessing that would make you jealous. It should.

If it doesn't, you don't really love her. Because God loves you and this world He created, He's not content with us living as if He is not God.

In fact, He lays out the results of worshiping a non-God really plainly so we do not miss it.

It is judgment. Judgment now because a non-God can't help you. And judgment forever, because a non-God can't save you.

So can I plead with you? Stop worshiping yourself! Stop living at odds with the entire universe!

There is only one King, there is only one Savior, there is only one point of the universe, there is only one means of salvation. It is not you. It is the God who created you! It is the God who reveals Himself in Scriptures! It is the God who sent His Son Jesus! It is the God who will send Him again one day to rule over the Universe!

Turn to this God.

Make a deliberate decision to stop trying to be your own king and Lord. Bow your knee to the One God the Father has placed in charge of the universe. Entrust all of your hopes for salvation, for being fixed, to Him. Plead with Him for mercy on the basis of Christ's work. Trust that He will show it.

The Bible calls this response repentance and faith.

We use those words sometimes without really knowing what they mean. Repenting and believing means turning from being your own king, from worshiping yourself, and bowing down before Jesus Christ, and worshiping Him instead, trusting God to show mercy to you because of the work He performed through His life, death and resurrection, looking to God the Father through Jesus Christ to rescue you from yourself, from your sin, from your brokenness, and looking to Him alone.

Please do this. Do it now. God holds out great hope for those who do.

The apostle John puts it like this: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Not condemned. Have eternal life. Hope for now. And hope forever. That pretty much sums it all up.

This is God's story of the universe. We have seen how it all started. We have learned how everything got to where it is now. And we have glimpsed where it all ends.

What part you will play in it? Will you rebel against God and end up serving as an eternal demonstration of His justice and hatred of sin? Or will you submit to Him and make God look great as He shows His kindness to you forever and ever, time without end?

To Think About

1. What are some of the things the Bible says are going to happen in the

future?

2. What is the best part of God's great plan?
3. What is it called when a person thinks and acts as if he were the center of the universe?
4. Are you living your life this way? Why did you answer the way you did?
5. What is God's attitude towards someone who is doing that? What are the results of living your life this way?
6. If you are living as if you were your own king, you should repent of your sin and believe on Christ. But what do those words mean? What does it mean to repent and believe?

