

The Story

finding your place in God's unfolding drama

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Study 1 - The Author of the Story

Read - Genesis 1:1-2

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." - Genesis 1:1

Overview

The Bible starts with a statement that encapsulates the entire story that is to follow... "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This statement reveals that there is a creator, reveals what he created (everything), and invites the reader into the story of the purpose of this creation. This is a story that is big enough to make sense of our lives, answer our questions, explain both the beauty and brokenness we see in the world (and our lives), make sense of our desires, dreams, and disappointments, and give us hope in the midst of it all. Most importantly, it is a true story.

While we often think the story is about us, this story is primarily about God – and that is good news! It is about the God who has always existed and always will. It is about the God who created all things, including us, and who holds all things together. While the story is not primarily about us, it is a story of "Good News" that affects and shapes our story in every way.

It is a story with four main acts: Creation, The Fall, Redemption and ultimate Restoration. These acts not only reveal that God made everything in the beginning; they reveal that God will restore everything in the end. This is through Jesus Christ, the main subject who binds this story together, and the salvation God offers through him.

Pastor and author Justin Buzzard put it this way, "You already have a relationship with this God. God is the author of your life, the author of your story. The question is whether you relate to God as your Judge (because you are still insisting on being the God of your own life) or whether you relate to God as your Father (because you're letting God be God – ruling, leading, and forgiving – and you're letting you be you, a forgiven and loved son or daughter of God). God is not in your story. You are a character in his story." (*The Big Story: How the Bible Makes Sense out of Life*).

Our hope is that you will enter into The Story and find your place in God's unfolding drama.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges, or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. What (or who) stands at the center of the stories the people around you believe and live?

2. What do we learn about God and the world we live in through Genesis 1:1-2?

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3. A. W. Tozer states that "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." What comes to your mind when you think about God? How does this shape your life?

4. Skim the following passages and summarize the story of the Bible.

Creation: Genesis 1 & 2

Fall: Genesis 3

Redemption: Romans 5:12-6:14

Restoration: Revelation 21-22

How does each of these "acts" point us to Jesus?

5. Map out your life story. Draw a timeline depicting 10 of the most significant moments of your life.

Born

Today

How do you see your story fitting within God's Story?

As you go...

- What questions you have about God and the world we live in. Ask others (kids, friends, neighbors, co-workers,) what their questions are. Begin a dialogue on those as a group and with friends.
- Pay attention this week to evidence of the four "acts" of God's story - where do you see beauty of the created order? brokenness of the fall? beauty of redemption? longing for final restoration?
- Discuss one area where you would like God to use you in his unfolding drama?

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Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the Creator and Author of life. God we acknowledge that you created all things, give meaning to all things and have given all things. You hold all things together and your purposes are true, right and good. We thank you that you have revealed yourself and your story through creation, your word, your son Jesus and your Spirit.

God help us to desire you and to better know you so that we would have the ultimate joy and purpose in this epic story you have written. Help us to see the effects of our rebellion and our need for the one and only Savior Jesus Christ who canceled sin's penalty on the Cross. God empower us with your Holy Spirit to overcome sin's power and presence in our lives and in this world. Jesus we look forward and long for the day when you return to bring justice and rid us and this world from the effects of sin and dwell with us forever. Come Lord Jesus.

Prayer requests

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Study 2 - Creation: The World

Read - Genesis 1:3-31

"And God said..." - Genesis 1:3

Overview

In 1972, Francis Schaeffer wrote a foundational work on the existence of a personal God creating personal beings, titled *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. In it, he demonstrates that, if we were left to guess about the nature of God, we would end up with many of the wrong metaphysical conclusions we see in society today (e.g. existentialism, pantheism, reductionism, etc.). Fortunately, we find in Genesis 1:3 that "God said." This settles, once and for all, that God is not hidden or silent. We are not left to guess, because God speaks. God does all things through his Word. He creates (Genesis 1:3), he tests (Psalm 105:17-19), he heals and delivers (Psalm 107:20), he enlightens and guides (Psalm 119:105), he revives the human soul (Psalm 19:7), and he accomplishes his purposes (Isaiah 55:11). Because the universe was spoken into existence by God's Word, and God does all things through his Word, we can listen to his Word in order to know God and know his plans, intentions, and his direction.

Still, there is potential for someone to hear or read God's Word and misunderstand what God is truly saying. But, God being God, he already thought of this. In order to help us understand, he not only spoke his Word and gave us Scripture; his "Word became flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). If you think that Jesus is somehow different from the "Word of God" spoken at creation, you are mistaken. The apostle John says, "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). This powerful truth helps us realize that Jesus is the "exact imprint of (God's) nature" (Hebrews 1:3), and if we examine Jesus' life we will have clearly seen the nature of God (John 14:9-10). Comparing the life of Jesus to our understanding of God's Word will help us not to misinterpret what God is saying.

Isaiah 55:11 states that God's Word "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." The apostle Paul puts it this way, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). We will see some of God's purposes fulfilled in this lifetime and some in the glory of eternity, but, either way, God's purposes that he has declared over our lives will be completed. This gives the Christian great hope, for we know that the same Word that came forth from God and created the universe has been placed within our hearts to accomplish his transforming power in our lives (Psalm 119:10-12).

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges, or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Our identity (or how we see ourselves) greatly affects all decisions in our lives. Read Genesis 1:27 and 2:7. What do you think is the significance of knowing that we are created in God's image and that our physical attributes were formed by God?

2. Many of the images we see of what success is, what love is, and what life is all about stand in stark contrast to God's image. Read Matthew 22:15-22 and Romans 8:29. Who does Jesus teach us our image belongs to? Why is it important that our image match up with God's image rather than the world's image or the image we see of ourselves in our brokenness?

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3. We know that Jesus is an exact reflection of God (Hebrews 1:3), so when we see Jesus we are seeing God (John 14:9-10). This means God's Word and God's nature are identical. There is no difference between God's Word and God's heart. As sinful humans, do our words and hearts sometimes differ? How might this make it difficult to believe what God says in his Word?

4. If we are unable to distinguish between truth and lies, we are susceptible to acting upon something that is not true and being led into disaster. Read Titus 1:2. Does God lie? Read John 8:44. Who is the father of lies? Even knowing the answers to these questions, what do you think causes us to believe lies about our life, our health, our money, our future, or anything else we hold dear?

5. When God created humanity, he said it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). The psalmist describes this in more detail in Psalm 139:13-14, showing that every person is intricately designed by God. Are there any physical features about yourself that you just don't like? Have you ever spent hours cooking a "very good" meal for someone just to have them turn their nose up and not like it? What feelings are associated with someone not liking or appreciating what you have spent time creating?

As you go...

- Spend time this week reading, thinking about, and listening to God's Word. As you absorb God's Word, contrast it to what you believe about God, what you believe about yourself, and what you believe about the world around you. Ask God to help you believe his Word.
- God's Word still creates today with the same power that it did at the beginning of the universe. If you have come to know Jesus as your Savior, you have seen the power of God's Word at work. You were dead in your sin, but God made you alive (Ephesians 2:4-5). Spend time meditating on this truth.

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Prayer

Almighty and loving God, teach me to humble myself to hear your voice above all other voices. May I place your Word in the highest place in my heart, and may I allow it to change me and mold me so that I am more closely transformed to your image.

Holy Jesus, I praise you for what you have done for me by saving me from my own careless destructiveness. I love you and declare that I will follow you like a sheep follows a shepherd. I refuse to follow the way of my own stubborn heart; rather, I set my heart on you, and I worship you and declare that you are my Lord!

May your Word abide in me as I abide in you, and may your Word change me to be more like you.

Prayer requests

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Study 3 - Creation: People

Read - Genesis 2:1-25

“Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” - Genesis 2:7

Overview

The crescendo of the great symphony of God's creative work appears in the second chapter of Genesis as God, with amazing care and detail, designs man and woman. All things we have read up to this point in Genesis have been in preparation to support this final masterpiece. Unlike the rest of creation, humanity was created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). God personally "formed" or "crafted" the human body to house the image he had created. God personally "breathed" from himself, into the lungs of man, the breath of his own life in order to make man alive (Genesis 2:7). The rest of creation was simply spoken into existence by God's Word, but we now see God doing something very different and very personal.

In Genesis 2, we find that the reason we exist, the reason we look the way we do, the reason we belong here, the reason we are equal yet different, and the reason we are different from everything else on the planet is because we were made in God's image. Humans are shown to be different from animals in some very distinct ways: (1) Humans are given "words" to name and communicate (Genesis 2:19). It is important to note that nothing on earth has words except humans and that God also does all things through his Word. (2) Humans are given "dominion" (Genesis 1:28). Only humans have the ability to create things that can completely change the environment around them. This ability to "dominate" creation directly reflects the image of the creator who truly dominates the entire universe.

If God created us, then it makes sense to look to God for answers to the fundamental philosophical questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? In fact, God wants to explain all of this to us. He says to us, "come let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). God wants to explain how he originally created us, how our choices have led us away from him and from knowing who he really is and, subsequently, from knowing who we really are. He wants to show us how Jesus came to reverse all those wrong choices and give us the opportunity to hit "reset." The apostle Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The personal and caring God that we see in Genesis has not abandoned us; he has given himself to us in an even greater way through Jesus Christ. Now the responsibility rests on each of us to know him. In knowing him, we learn everything we need to know about ourselves.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges, or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. In the Genesis account, it is clear that God has made humanity different from animals. In what ways do you see this? (Consider things like choice vs. instinct, etc.). How do you think understanding these differences is important to living life the way it was intended by God?

2. Why do you think it is important to understand that God is personally involved with who we are and what we should be about? Why do you think that throughout history people have often thought of God as being impersonal?

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3. God breathed life into man to create human life. How do you think this corresponds to the Holy Spirit in the new creation of salvation? (See John 20:21-22, Acts 1:8)

4. God formed our physical bodies. We know that shame was not part of God's original plan as it relates to our physical appearance (Genesis 2:25). Why do you think so many people feel shame about their physical appearance? Read Ephesians 2:10. How would it change your thinking about your physical appearance if you knew God personally and genetically designed you in a way that would carry out specific purposes on earth?

5. Read Jeremiah 33:3 and Matthew 7:7-11. What is God's attitude about revealing himself and making himself known to us? Why do you think it is important to know God? Why do you think God would want you to know him?

As you go...

- This week, spend time thinking about how you were personally designed by God (both inside and out).
- Look at those around you with the understanding that they, too, have been personally designed by God. See if knowing that you were crafted by God in the same way as they were causes you to change your opinion of their importance.
- Read through Ecclesiastes 1, noting how meaningless life would be without God. Pay attention to where you see this cycle of meaninglessness in the world around you. What happens when we seek to establish the purpose of existence while denying the origin of that existence?

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Prayer

Father God, I call upon you today because I again realize that you alone are my Father, you are my Creator, you are my sustainer, you are the breath that I breathe, and I need you every minute of every hour. I have failed to live up to your image, and yet you love me. I have turned my back on you countless times and wrongly judged you, yet you keep reaching out to me through grace and love.

Thank you for sending your holy Son, Jesus, so that I can follow his example and walk in his steps. My Jesus, I need you. Fill me with your Spirit. Strengthen me with your power. Fill me with your peace. Fill my heart with your love so that I can love those around me as you love them. You are my Lord and my God.

I need you, Father. I need you to teach me about you. I need you to explain me to me. I need you to open my mind to understand all that you have done and all that you will do.

Prayer requests

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Study 4 - The Fall: Sin **Read - Genesis 3:1-13**

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” - Genesis 3:6

Overview

The reality of life reveals a story that involves brokenness and pain. With that, whatever we believe must give an account for all the pain and brokenness we see and experience. The source of this brokenness, which is explored in the unfolding drama of the Scriptures, is found in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and God kept his promise. He had warned that, if they disobeyed him by eating from the one tree he commanded them not to eat from, they would surely die. He had given them ALL other trees. Their rebellion resulted in their ultimate physical death, their (and our) spiritual death as they were cut off from God, and in the pain and brokenness we still experience in relationships and creation today.

Justin Buzzard writes, “What drove original sin was the same thing that has driven every sin since. Adam and Eve decided what was right in their own eyes. They chose not to live by faith and chose not to trust God’s word. They went their own way, not God’s way. Sin is not just lawbreaking. Sin is also lawmaking. Adam and Eve didn’t just break God’s rules, they made up their own rules. They sought to be the god of their own lives. ...We are exactly the same, just dressed differently. We ignore God’s voice because we like the sound of our own voice. We ignore God’s rule because we want to make our own rules.”

The immediate response for Adam and Eve was hiding, shame, and blaming. Previously, they were naked and not ashamed in the presence of one another and their creator God (Genesis 2:25) – open physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Their rebellion against God caused them to feel sin’s shame, and they immediately tried to hide from one another and from their loving God. They began lying and blaming one another for their rebellion.

But God, in his grace and mercy, doesn’t give them what their sin deserves. He pursues them, loves them, and helps them see the brokenness they have created. He gives them hope. In the same way, while we rebel against him, God pursues us, shows us our sin, and reveals his love for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Share an example (current or past) of when your life intersected with the pain this world brings.

2. What tactics does Satan use to tempt Adam and Eve? How do we see him use the same tactics today?

Read Matthew 4:1-11. How does Jesus respond to the temptation of Satan?

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3. Where do you feel God is “holding out” on you? What is one area of life where you are ignoring God’s voice and living according to your own rules and standards?

4. What was the immediate result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience (3:7-13)? How does God respond?

Where do you feel shame, and what do you use to hide it?

5. Read Romans 5:6-11. How does Jesus reveal that God still loves us and pursues us, even in our rebellion?

As you go...

- Read the newspaper, a news feed, or watch the news every day this week. Notice most of the news is bad news about the pain and brokenness in our world. How does the fall make sense of it?
- Take some time to think about all that God has given you. Think about his goodness and generosity in your life. How can you relate to Eve, who had everything yet sought one thing that God withholds?
- Identify and talk through what fig leaves you create. Ask, “what do I do on a regular basis to try to prove myself? What masks do I wear? What accomplishments or lies do I hide behind?” How can Jesus bring you freedom?

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Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come to you knowing that you are the creator and giver of all things. God, that you are completely good, perfect, and holy. Lord, we testify of your goodness, generosity, and care for us; that your ways are right, good, and true.

But God we confess that we, like Adam and Eve, choose to rebel and live according to our own standards and feeble ways. God, we confess that we feel shame because of our rebellion and shortcomings, but we try to hide it with various postures, accomplishments, and trinkets.

God, we are sorry for believing the lies of Satan over the truth and goodness of your Word. Father, thank you for loving us so much that you continually pursue us and expose our ways. Thank you that you love us and sent your Son, Jesus, to take the punishment we deserve. Thank you for your Holy Spirit who continually helps us to see our disobedience and empowers us to turn from it to true life with you and your people. Amen.

Prayer requests

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Study 5 - The Fall: Judgment

Read - Genesis 3:14-24

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." - Genesis 3:15

Overview

God is a good God and a just God who keeps his promises. The result of Adam and Eve's disobedience was disastrous. It resulted in broken relationships within humanity, between humanity and creation, and between God and man. Vaughn Roberts expounds on these results for Adam and Eve and every human since: "The old innocence has gone. And God judges the guilty, just as he had said he would. Satan was wrong. God's warning that Adam and Eve would die was no mere threat; it is carried out. They are banished from the garden and a guard is placed to prevent them from returning to the tree of life. They continue to exist physically, but spiritually they are dead, cut off from God's presence. It is only a matter of time before their physical existence also ends." (*God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*)

In response to Adam and Eve's sin, God says he will bring pain to the woman in childbearing and that she will desire to rule over and be against her husband. The man's pain will come from the ground as work, which was created as a good gift but will become a painful toil. God gave pain in the arenas of life that men and women are primarily called to and where they tend to find significance and identity. Life apart from God and his ways always leads to pain and suffering.

Intermingled with this reality of judgment are signs of hope. It is Satan who God promises to cut off and "crush" (3:15). God also makes a sacrifice to cover Adam and Eve (3:21). Both of these are signs that point forward to the LORD Jesus Christ who would become the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, who would be cut off from God so that we could be reunited. It is the LORD Jesus that this unfolding drama points forward to who will bring redemption and restoration over Satan, sin, and death for his people and all his creation.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Think about your day yesterday. Jot down some examples of seeing effects of the fall that this passage brings to light.

2. What does God's punishment mean for:

- The serpent
- Women
- Men
- All human beings

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3. Women, how have you experienced pain in family relationships? Men, how have you experienced pain in your work?

Why do you think God placed pain in areas of life where men and women tend to seek their significance?

4. Where do we see God's grace toward Adam and Eve (and all humanity through them) in this passage?

5. Read the following passages. How do we see Jesus fulfill God's promise to defeat Satan?

Colossians 2:13-15

Hebrews 2:14-15

Revelation 20:10

6. What does it look like for your family, work, and relationships to flourish in the midst of pain?

As you go...

- How does God's curse and judgment in this passage make sense of the pain and struggle you experience?
- Be intentional about listening to people this week. Where do they speak of struggle and hardship? Help them understand it through the lens of the fall.
- What are some steps you can take to bring reconciliation in your family and in your vocation this week?

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Prayer

God, we thank you for your grace and mercy. We acknowledge that your Word is true as we experience the pain that comes about from the sin of Adam and Eve and our own sin every day. God, we feel the effects of the fall in our relationship with you, our relationships in our families, and in our work.

God, we thank you for the good news of the gospel that is hinted at in this passage. God, we thank you that you extended undeserved grace and mercy toward us by covering us and promising to crush the head of the serpent. LORD Jesus, we thank you for your pursuit of us and your obedience that took you to the cross to win us back and gain victory over Satan, sin, and death.

Holy Spirit, empower us to bring about restoration and reconciliation in the areas of our lives where we experience so much brokenness.

Prayer requests

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Study 6 – Redemption: Sin's Penalty

Read – Romans 5:12-21

“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” – Romans 5:20-21

Overview

Thanks be to God that the curse of death in Genesis 3 was not the final word. Sin entered the world through Adam, and the penalty was death and separation from God. Through the law that was given to Moses, God's people were made more aware of their sin, but they could not overcome it. All of God's Word points to the need for a Savior.

Through Jesus' death on the cross, a death we deserved to die, God's wrath was satisfied. Through Jesus' resurrection three days later, death lost its power. The penalty was paid. As Romans 5:18-19 states, “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” By God's grace, love, mercy, and compassion, we are not only offered freedom from death but also the righteousness of Christ. If we accept the gift of eternal life and redemption that we have been offered, God no longer looks on us and sees sinners – he looks on us and sees the righteousness of his perfect Son who paid for our transgressions.

Romans 8:1 states, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In Psalm 32:1-2 David declares, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

There is nothing we can do to pay for our sin, and there's no sin we could have committed that would prevent the Father from embracing us with open arms when we turn to him. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21). Jesus paid the penalty, and God's desire is that we accept the gift of salvation.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If you do, describe the circumstances surrounding your decision to follow him. If you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, what do you think is preventing you from accepting him?

2. Read Romans 5:10. Paul not only suggests that we were undeserving of Jesus' sacrifice but also that "we were enemies" of God when we were reconciled with him. How does this affect our understanding of God's grace?

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3. Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. How does the father show grace to both the unrighteous younger son and the self-righteous older son? Which son do you relate to more?

4. Read John 6:40. Is it ever difficult to remember that the God who paid for your sins also paid for the sins of your enemies and desires that all be saved? How should that shape the way you interact with others?

5. Though the Word of God speaks clearly about the reality of heaven and hell, we can sometimes forget what Jesus has saved us from and what joy awaits us as children of the Most High. Is there an experience, scripture, or story that God has used to help you better understand eternity?

As you go...

- Choose a verse to lean on this week that reminds you that God loves you more than you can imagine and that there is nothing you can do to earn his love or forgiveness.
- This week, in community group or to anyone else the Holy Spirit is leading you to talk to, share testimony of what God has done in your life. This could be your story of salvation or any other ways you've experienced God's love and power.
- Find ways to encourage one another in the truth of the gospel. Ask God to show you how to encourage others, and seek out people who can speak truth to your unbelief. Pray for boldness.

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Prayer

Heavenly Father, restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. I have experienced your goodness, love, kindness, grace, and new mercies each day. Do not let me forget all that you've done. Give me boldness to speak of the salvation you freely give and tell others how you've changed me. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

If you have never asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior but would like to, here's a sample prayer you can pray. Speak to God from your heart and use your own words wherever you feel led.

Dear God, I come to you in the name of Jesus. I acknowledge to you that I am a sinner, and I'm sorry for my sins and the life that I've lived apart from you; I need your forgiveness. I believe that your only Son Jesus Christ shed his blood on the cross and died for my sins, and now I want to turn from my sin.

Romans 10:9 says, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Right now I confess Jesus as the Lord of my soul. With my heart, I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. This very moment I accept Jesus Christ as my own personal Savior and according to his Word, right now I am saved.

Thank you Jesus for your unlimited grace that has saved me from my sins. I thank you Jesus that your grace leads to repentance. Therefore Lord Jesus transform my life so that I may bring glory and honor to you alone and not to myself. Thank you Jesus for dying for me and giving me eternal life.

Prayer requests

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Study 7 - Redemption: Sin's Power

Read - Romans 6:1-14

"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

- Romans 6:4

Overview

At the throne of grace, we find sustaining strength and power to follow the path God has for us. We are redeemed! Christ has paid the penalty for our sin, and death has lost its sting! But God also has a purpose for us here in this life. Through God's sanctifying grace, we have the power, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to become more like Christ and live in obedience to our loving Father.

His grace does not just find us at the point of salvation; it abides with us through the Holy Spirit and energizes our obedience. One of the beautiful things about the gospel is that it doesn't allow us to prepare for salvation. We can't work our way up to it in order to make sure we'll be able to handle all the obedience that will be expected of us. Quite the opposite, we're only asked to receive God's gift with faith. At that moment, there is no condemnation and God is for you. Jesus' obedience is yours, sin no longer has dominion over you, and the Holy Spirit is living in you and teaching you how to walk in newness of life.

In Romans 6:1-2, Paul dives deeper into the topic of grace: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" In verses 12-13, he continues, "let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness."

God has great plans for his children as instruments for righteousness, and it's crucial that we recognize that we have been redeemed from sin's power and reject the temptation to return to old ways. Sin has died, and we must not mistake its rattle for life.

Through God's love and kindness, we're given the Holy Spirit to convict us and bring us to repentance. Repentance is not self-condemnation or doing penance for sins, and it does not involve the Lord continually reminding us of old failures. Repentance is recognizing our sin and turning from it – into the loving arms of our Lord and Savior who keeps no record of wrongs.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. When have you felt the Holy Spirit give you power to obey and do something you knew God was calling you to do?

2. Read Isaiah 61:3. What does it look like to live under grace instead of under the power of sin?

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3. Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 and 1 Peter 2:6. What is the difference between godly grief (conviction) and worldly grief (shame)? Why is godly grief reason to rejoice?

4. Read Hebrews 4:14-16. How does this scripture encourage us to turn to God in repentance instead of turning away in shame when we stumble?

5. In her book, *Tramp for the Lord*, Corrie ten Boom says that "obedience is easy when you know you are being guided by a God who never makes mistakes." Do you ever feel like God has made a mistake in choosing you to further his kingdom? What verse can you lean on to remind yourself that God has given you all you need to live in joyful obedience to him?

As you go...

- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you are clinging to sin in your life. Repent and be vulnerable with God. Ask him to be your strength and give you wisdom as you walk in newness of life.
- James 5:16 tells us to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. This week, take steps to make this a reality in your life if it is not already. Be willing not only to share with each other but also to commit to praying for one another.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of people who have helped you to walk in obedience at different points in your life. If possible, reach out to those people and thank them.

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Prayer

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24)

Heavenly Father, show me my own sin so that I can repent. Don't let me become blind to your character or deaf to your voice. I want to see you; I want to hear your voice when you speak. Lead me in the work of repentance with your kind and gentle hand. Guide me gently through each day as I learn to follow you and walk according to your Word. Jesus, thank you for taking my sins upon you when you died on the cross. Thank you that, just as you rose triumphantly from the grave, I too can walk in newness of life by the grace of my Father in heaven.

Prayer requests

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Study 8 – Restoration: Sin's Presence

Read – Revelation 21:1-27

“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.’” – Revelation 21:3

Overview

The story of the Bible could easily be given in three clear movements – places where God moves toward his people.

In movement one, we see God stepping down from his lofty pedestal, creating all things out of the pure delight and abundance of love He enjoys within the Trinity. The universe and all of its individual parts are created “good” in God’s eyes. At the end of act one, sin fractures the perfect relationship God had with humanity – the culmination and final work of creation. In movement two, we see God redirecting the hearts of his people back to himself through various Old Testament figures like Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah. The climax of this move begins with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, followed by his life, death, and resurrection. This second condescension (voluntary decent to our human level) began the glorious work of redemption that has continued even into our own day in the lives of Christ’s followers individually and corporately as the church through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In movement three, the same God who would step down to create the physical, material world and who would condescend to take on flesh of his own will come down in a final, glorious “act of condescension” to dwell with his people in the New Heaven and the New Earth. The old will pass away, and he will make all things new. All of the sorrow and death and pain brought on by sin will only be known as a thing of the past.

While there are a number of passages that give credence to the idea of believers being with God in heaven at some point in our existence, what we see in Revelation 21 is directionally different from that. In Revelation 21, it is not us who shed our earthly bodies to go up to be with God; it is God who once again comes down to dwell with us in a final act of restoration. Nothing could be more wonderful or more counter-cultural to our own day. Humanism says to make the most of your own existence by bettering yourself. Buddhism teaches to shed yourself of your own consciousness. Universalism seeks righteousness through the avoidance of “offending anyone” and the dissolution of any distinction. Animism prescribes sacrifices and ritual. All of these have one thing in common: they all teach that, in some way, we will be able to ascend, or rise, to the glorious hereafter. And yet, Christianity teaches quite the opposite. Not only does Christianity say that this ascension is impossible, it says that ascension was never the plan. Condescension is. In the final act, we do not go to be with God. He comes down to be with us.

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Read Zechariah 8:1-8, John 1:14, and Revelation 21:3. What do these passages show us about the heart of God toward his people and his desire to be with them? To what extent will he go to make that happen?

2. Throughout the Bible, we see the invitation for the "thirsty to come and drink." Read through either Isaiah 55 or John 4:1-14 and discuss the similar use of this metaphor in Revelation 21:6.

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3. Read Revelation 21:9-4. What do you think John was trying to communicate to his audience by likening Jerusalem to “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb”? What significance did this city have throughout the Old Testament and even into the Gospels or Book of Acts?

4. Read Revelation 21:15-21. When you read through the list of building materials and measurements of this new and glorious city, what comes to mind? What point do you assume John is trying to get across with this kind of detail? How can this be encouraging to us today?

5. Revelation ends with a remarkable description of the kind of city God will create as the New Jerusalem. Go through each description in Revelation 21:22-27, one by one, and discuss what it will be like to live in a city like this.

As you go...

- Take some time this week to reflect on what causes you to “thirst” and what quenches that thirst in you. What are the actions or emotions you engage in regularly that either leave you feeling dry and disconnected or full and connected to Christ?
- Talk through those two lists with a friend with the purpose of intentionally maximizing those things that draw you closer to Christ and minimizing those things that pull you away from him.
- Pray for your friends, family, and co-workers who don’t know Christ, imagining what their lives would look like if God were to come down into their situation and make it new and whole again. Pray that he does those things, and look for ways in which he might even begin to do some of those things through you.

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Prayer

Heavenly Father, we long to be with you. The day-to-day striving and strife of this world has left us worn out, weary, and thirsty for things that cannot satisfy. Our true joy is delighting in you. Our true hope is looking to you. Our true home is found in you. Teach us to walk like Abraham, with our eyes pointed towards the city with eternal foundations, whose designer and builder is you alone.

Prayer requests

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Study 9 – Restoration: Jesus is Coming

Read – Revelation 22:1-21

“And behold, I am coming soon...” – Revelation 22:7

Overview

Over the past eight weeks, we have walked through the grand narrative from the beginning to our arrival at this moment – the final lines of the story we are wrapped up in. The writer of Revelation, John, has seen wondrous visions of the things that are to come, and, as the visions are concluded, he hears the final words from the Lord Christ, the one who began them. What final wisdom does our Lord leave for us? A promise: I will return.

The longer we live in this world, the more we know of separation and disunity. Many learn of separation at a young age – as children who are subject to divorce of their parents or who witness tragic loss of life. But even those who are spared these cruelties early on will come to know separation well. We are too often isolated from family or friends, we watch those we love die, and we must often deal with heart-wrenching rejection from others. It is into this darkness that Jesus speaks the spark of his final words: I will come to you. The separation you know will end.

The book of Revelation contains both blessing and curse, but, in the end, blessing has the last word. The word of blessing here is of reunion and restoration. The descriptions of Revelation 21 and 22 harken back to the paradise of Eden. Through the work of God, the paradise that was lost is restored to the world once more. The nightmare is over; God has returned to his people as he promised long ago (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Such a reunion would not have been possible without the sacrifice of Christ. Through our own efforts, coming to God would have been fruitless. By God's loving act of grace, God and man can be reconciled. The work is done (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ welcomes all to drink freely of the river of life (22:17) that they might share in the eternal reunion.

As Christians, we are called to live in the tension of already and not yet. The works of Christ are completed, but the bridegroom has not yet returned for his bride, the Church. As we wait for this “not yet,” we are bound to share the words he and his followers have left for us:

Christ has died.
Christ has risen.
Christ will come again.

To paraphrase John's words (22:20), “Oh let it be! Come, Lord Jesus!”

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Message notes and application

Write down notes as you listen to the sermon and read the text. What is the main point of the text? What catches your attention, challenges or confuses you?

Passage Questions

1. Share a time when you were reunited with someone you loved. Describe the way it felt to be forced to wait for them. Do you think God shares these emotions in having to wait for his reunion with us?

2. Read Revelation 22:1-5 and Ezekiel 47:1-12. Summarize the descriptions of New Jerusalem. What do you notice about John's vision of a new world? What is different from the images of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3? What is the same?

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3. In *The Big Story*, Justin Buzzard writes the following in his chapter titled "Home":

"We have never come face to face with the living God. We've never been able to. Our imperfection would be burned up by his holiness. But on that day, we will be there. We will be face to face with God."

What will this reunion that the Bible speaks of mean to you? Do you relish it? Fear it? How do you think you will react to seeing God face to face in the person of Christ?

4. In Mark 13:32-36, Jesus warns his followers to stay awake and watchful, for they do not know the time of their reunion. What does this warning mean for us today? How can we, as followers of the same Master, keep vigilant more than 2,000 years later?

As you go...

- Meditate on Revelation 22:13. Christ refers to himself as the Alpha and the Omega (the beginning and the end). How will the assurance that the power of God goes before us and is in control of all things past, present, and future alter the way you think about him this week?
- In what ways should the descriptions of heaven and hell change the way we see other people in regard to their eternal destiny? Who can you focus on this week that needs to hear the Spirit's invitation to come and drink from the river of life?

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Prayer

Lord, all of creation groans for your return. We long for the day when we will see you face to face. We long for the day when we'll live in the light of your presence and night will be no more. Your glory and your eternity are more than we can fathom.

Lord, you are mighty. You are good. You are our kind Father. You are the Alpha and Omega, from everlasting to everlasting, full of unending love and faithfulness. You never change, and your promises are true.

Holy Spirit, fill us and teach us. Help us to know the joy that is set before us as you bear witness with our spirit, giving us confidence that we are children of God.

Jesus, we look forward and long for the day when you return to bring justice, rid us and this world from the effects of sin, and dwell with us forever. Come, Lord Jesus.

Prayer requests