

## Introduction

### The God and The Story

**W**hat if I told you a wonderful story? Would you like that? Remember, good stories are rarely simple. They aren't easy. Most really interesting stories are complicated. They are often glorious, frightening, and tender, all at the same time. Some of them can leave you confused or frustrated. Most make you pause and think. Now and then, they can be playful and fun. But regardless, all wonderful stories awaken your heart.

If you want a simple, easy story, turn back now. But if you want a story that possesses that curious difficulty and strangeness that all great stories have, then perhaps I have a tale for you. And I think you will be glad you listened, because this story has a glorious ending.

So, do you want me to tell you a story?

Oh – and by the way – this story is true.

This story is the tale of a God and of a people. It is a story of great danger and terrifying cost. It is a story of sacrifice and blood. And it is a story of safety, warmth, and hope.

It is the story that is found in the Bible.

Most people live assuming that the Bible is sort of like that Sophomore Lit book you had in college – a loose collection of somewhat unrelated stories, poems, and letters that someone collected into a book. But what if all of the tales, events, history, and prophecy in God's Word are actually all joining hands to tell us the same wonderful story – the gradually developing biography that is

the story of us and God? What if, despite their variations and differences, the books of the Bible are all ultimately written by the same author telling the same story; an author who wants to convey really wonderful news to his beloved people?

I want to tell you this story, and I want to tell you about the God who wrote it.

*--The Unfolding Story*

Here's the secret: when someone says that "Christ came and died so that you might live," what they are telling you is actually the *end result* of something that developed for centuries. Most contemporary Christians know a lot about how Jesus died on the cross to save us from death and isolation. We understand that our salvation comes by his atoning death; his paying the price for our sins, and his righteousness that is given to us. But Christ's arrival on earth actually comes at the *ending* of an epic One Story that started in a garden and took centuries to come to fruition. This wonderful story didn't start in the New Testament. The faith that we embrace – the salvation that Christ accomplished on the cross, actually began all the way back in the Book of Genesis.

The One Story is about the frankly amazing process that's been going on behind the scenes of history since the Beginning, a gradually developing rescue operation -- God's plan to save us and make us his own. And all of the Bible's stories are actually developing this One Story.

If you think about it, most of the things that God has created "develop." For some reason, God made most things to begin small and then gradually "grow up" over time, becoming bigger, richer, and more like they should be. Babies are born pretty undeveloped. When they come out of the womb, they really don't have much to

offer. But if a baby gets what he needs, pretty soon he *develops*. Within eighteen years or so, he becomes a young adult, maybe even someone you can stand being around!

Our salvation develops in the same way. If you read the Old Testament carefully, you'll observe something. You'll see that God's people are always looking for something/someone. Listen to the Old Testament stories and you'll hear the people in them anticipating a "Land, a "Promise," or a special "One" who is expected. Their belief is that they are a part of something massive that God is already at work to accomplish during their own days on earth. Maybe they've wrecked the world, like Adam. Maybe, like Abraham, they're wandering toward a promise they don't even understand. Maybe, like Moses and the people of Israel, they are slaves of the most powerful nation on earth. Whatever the case, all of God's Old Testament followers are looking, searching, and anticipating something.

And they are *looking* because God comes to Adam and Eve right after the Fall in the Garden of Eden and begins *promising*. They are expecting something because God has *told them* to expect something -- something amazing that will develop for God's children as history unfolds.

That something is a salvation, a promised hope - a Story.

### **--Snapshots of a Promise**

Within the first few pages of this Story, moments after his new children first turn their back on him, God begins promising that he will bring redemption and hope. But his salvation will not come all at once. It will develop a little at a time, almost imperceptibly, but grandly, with a beauty, breathtaking. The whole Bible is the tale of that gradual unfolding of God's wonderful Story.

God will chase after *Adam and Eve*, immediately addressing the catastrophe that they have brought upon themselves. He promises that with a powerful but bruised “seed” he will bring them back home. Even in Eden, God is beginning a story that will redeem his people.

God begins fulfilling that promise to Adam and Eve through his relationship with *Noah*. He tells Noah that somehow the One Story will be about a protection and a preservation. Even in the midst of worldwide destruction, God is working to build a cradle of safety for his growing promise.

The One Story continues, and the salvation promise develops meat on its bones in God’s mighty dealings with *Abraham*. God tells Abraham that the promised salvation will be by faith, as well as by the miracle birth of a Son who will save his people -- a miraculous “ram in the bushes” who will be a substitute for his lost children. He also promises Abraham a land, the beginnings of a new “garden,” as a home for his people.

With *Moses*, God deepens his Eden promises and enriches the story even more. Somehow the One Story will involve a dramatic rescue from a powerful foe. And once God’s people are saved from that enemy, he will teach them through Moses that he wants them to *look like him*. His Law will spell out the way God wants his children’s hearts to live and love. He wants the members of his family to bear a “family resemblance” to their Father. At Eden he wanted his people to bear his image. In the wilderness, his Love and his Law will begin working to heal his people and bring them back to his likeness. But even with Moses, it is the same promise being fulfilled – the same story developing.

In God’s relationship with *David*, the One Story develops even more complexity and richness as the promised salvation

takes a turn toward royalty. Not only will a special One arrive and bring salvation, but he will also be a King who reigns forever. God had wanted Adam to rule wisely over his creation. In David, he will be working to restore that perfect kingship once more.

The *prophets* are next, and they will stand as powerful spokesmen for the heart of God. In the prophets, we will hear the subjective personal thoughts of God himself as he develops his One Story. He will speak his heart to us about the promises (and the dangers) of life with him. Also, many of the shadowy, symbolic themes of the One Story will be illuminated by the prophets. Their proclamations will bring deeper clarity to what God has in store for his people.

Through his prophets, God will also unfold powerful images of the One who has been promised as redeemer of his people. We will learn that, while he will be a king, he will also be a suffering servant. He will come as a baby and be like a little lamb, but one day he will rule with a rod of iron. Somehow, this redeemer will be brutally sacrificed to save his people, yet ultimately “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:7).

And finally, with the arrival of *the Christ* in the New Testament, we have the long-awaited announcement of good news. The Promised One has come! Now at last there are “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:8). And in him we will see the fulfillment of all the shadowy symbols that have been foretold for centuries. Death will cover him, but he will emerge glorious to claim his people. In Jesus, the promised Messiah, we will find that God keeps his promises.

But even then, the One Story is not over.

God promises not just a Savior, but a *Kingdom* that will last forever. He is not just wanting our personal salvation, he is wanting

to *rebuild his original creation* completely! And that restoration is continuing. Even today, we are still living the One Story. We are further along in its progression than men like Abraham and Moses. We know more of the story than they did and have seen more fulfillment. But we are still living in “the waiting” before the promise is fully realized -- just like our Old Testament fathers did. The One Story is still not fully complete, and won’t be until God brings ultimate, glorious resolution to his people and his creation – when all things are made new (Rev. 21:5). Until he does so, we, like the creation, continue to “groan” as Paul says in Romans 8, longing for the restoration of God’s perfect world.

From ancient times until the present, the One Story remains the same. From its earliest rumor to Adam to its formal inception with Abraham, it’s the same story. From its development with Moses to its richness in David, the same One Story plays out; all working to fulfill God’s unprecedented promise to bring us back home.

Through the kings – the same promise.

Through the prophets – the same promise.

In Christ – the same promise.

And today, it’s the same promise that we believe.

The same Hope. The same One Story!

Join me as we follow its trail.

*--The Heart of God*

His story is breathtaking. The woven pieces of his promise form a tapestry of love. But it gets better. The other treasure that we will discover together is the *God who writes this story*. I want us to look together and find his *heart*.

When I began exploring the One Story of the Bible, I was initially motivated out of my desire to understand God’s salvation

and the way it unfolded throughout scripture. But as I read and studied, what I found was not just a story (much less a doctrine or a theology). What was knocking me out of my chair was the heart of God himself.

As a therapist and a speaker, people often talk to me about their experience of God. It runs the gamut. Some people experience him as angry and full of disappointment at their “idols,” or lack of commitment. Others portray him as just a big meek teddy bear. Sometimes people see him as benevolent, but really just sort of “putting up” with them because of Jesus. Unfortunately (and I get this one a lot), many Christians ache because they feel so far from him. They say things like, “My relationship God just feels flat, even rote or boring. I want to feel close to him again, but I don’t even know how.”

Whatever your experience is, I want to help you find God’s *true* heart again. God wants to be known -- really known. Part of that is because he doesn’t like being misunderstood any more than you do. But mostly it is because he knows that if we ever truly saw him, the wonder of who he really is would reach deep down into our souls and give us something to satisfy our deepest thirst.

Well, he gives us a beacon to find him: *In the background of all of the stories we will tell, is the heart of the God who writes them.* They are singing his desire for us, longing to show us who he really is. Understanding the flow of his salvation story is wonderful, but finding the heart of the God of those stories is even richer. I want us to find him together as we hear his stories.

### **--Our hearts need to know this God**

Recently, I was having lunch with a friend of mine who was lamenting the fact that he spent such little time with God. He

confessed how he often felt bored and disinterested in his faith. I appreciated his humble candor. Many of us can feel this way.

Then he asked me if I had any thoughts as to why this was the case. “Why do you think that I am struggling so much in my prayer life?”

“Well,” I replied, “I believe the reason that you (and all of us) struggle with spending time with God is that we obviously must not have any idea of what he is like. What he is *really* like.”

I related to him an experience I had years earlier when I took my oldest daughter to a Bruce Springsteen concert. I wanted to introduce her to the wonder that “the Boss” can create. As he flipped the crowd of thousands into a frenzy of joy; as he had us all singing along with him to *Thunder Road* and *Jungleland*, it hit me: How is it that this man, who only bears a fragment of the image of God, still creates in us such absolute ecstasy and joy? If God created him, and the creation can never be greater than the creator – and Springsteen can create this much wonder – what must the *author* of such wonder be like? If being with Bruce Springsteen created this much explosive excitement, why are we not all completely intoxicated when we get to be with the very *author* of delight? Why do we get bored in church?

The only answer I have come up with is that we must not really know what God is really like. We don’t live conscious of his wonder.

My friend is an artist. I told him, “I love your paintings. You know that I own several. But if given the option to go to lunch with you or one of your paintings, which do you think I would find more interesting?” The creation cannot be better than the creator. And we will do anything to engage God’s creation – skiing, sailing, sunsets, a full moon. If these small shadows of who he is so enchant us, what must he be like? You just got back from skiing in Vail.” I added. “It was overwhelmingly wonderful; I saw your pictures. But what would it be like to be with the person who invented Vail, Colorado?”

My friend said he had never thought of God like that. Like most of us, he thought of God as part of his “spiritual” life, someone to whom we are supposed to worship and pray, but frankly, who is rather dry, distant, and ephemeral.

But what if God’s heart is the source of everything good?  
Would you want to know that heart?

### **--The God we do not expect**

So, what *is* he like? Who will we find as we listen to this story? I think you will find him captivating. He is brilliant, forceful, and sometimes even funny.

In this story, we will see mankind creating all sorts of disastrous problems, and then we will watch as God responds with creative, powerful, and even agonizing solutions. And his solutions are rarely what you might expect. He is wise and clever and shrewd.

We will often see him engage the foolishness and hurtfulness of mankind. When *we* see injustice and wrongdoing in our world, we are frequently offended and angry. So is he. But he doesn’t just react out of vindictiveness or revenge as we often do. Instead, he carefully sculpts his response in such a way as to bring the best new peace and life. We will see him do this repeatedly.

When he encounters our failings and broken needfulness, he isn’t irritated and annoyed. He is soft and gentle, responding with an unexpected patience, as he sees who we can *become*, even though we are currently a hot mess. He is “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Ps. 103:8). But he *does* respond. He is not a lame softie. He is relentless power.

Love seems to govern his heart, and he longs for the warmest relationship with us. He even sings songs about it! He has swirled in the overflowing love of the Trinity for eternity, and he created us so that we could share in that love. So much so, that he will see him put

aside what he cherishes most in order to have us. Even to the point of watching his son die so that we can live and be his.

He is deeply warm and tender. He promises us that even if a mother could forget her nursing child, he would not forget us (Is. 49:15). And when his holiness is violated, he responds with blistering justice and wrath. But as we will see throughout his story, the most noteworthy thing about him is that when his wrath and justice most endanger his beloved children, his heart is such that he turns that vengeance upon himself so that he can protect us. Somehow, he is someone who would die for you.

When I hear his stories, he breaks my heart; he makes me laugh; he frightens me to death; and he makes me feel like I could conquer the world -- all at the same time. I believe that you will find this person likewise as compelling. He is wise and loving and overwhelmingly strong. And mostly, he wants you. He wants joy for you. He is joy!

God wants to be known. And in Hebrew culture, the word "know" doesn't mean having a cognitive knowledge or understanding, like, "I know how to update my iPhone." Hebrew "knowing" implies a deep abiding, connected intimacy, such as "Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived" (That is some seriously intimate knowing!) (Gen. 4:1).

God wants us to see him and be so very close to him. It is my prayer that as we look at his stories, we will not only see his salvation promise unfold, but that, we will get a deeper and richer sense of what our God is like. What better way to get to know someone that to hear stories about them, and God's story tells us who he is. He is wonderful and alive, and safe and scary. He has fathomless love, and frightening righteousness. He would do anything to have you, and he wants you to do anything to have him back.

Welcome to the One Story.

Let's listen to it together in all its chapters. Let's marvel as we see God's redemption unfold over centuries of promise. And let's find together the God of that story. His stories are a centuries long song proclaiming his true heart for us.

I want us to hear his music.

And he wants us to sing along.