



TRUE STORY: FROM CREATION TO RESTORATION

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is not just a list of rules to obey, stories to be inspired by, or morals to live your life by. Sure, the Bible contains rules, stories and morality, but it is so much more than just these things. It is the true story of the world. It is a divine drama. It is a dramatic six-act play.

In their book The Drama of Scripture Mike Goheen and Craig Bartholomew offer a clarifying warning:

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author's intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should. Idolatry has twisted the dominant cultural story of the secular Western world. If as believers we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thought and action, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture, but the lies of an idolatrous culture. Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!

We long to read our Bible correctly and live our lives faithfully. Below are the 6 symbols we use to identify the 6 acts of the Divine Drama. This is a useful tool for making the overarching story stick. After the symbols you will find our short telling of the True Story. We've chosen a few threads in this telling that are helpful for people to get an overview of the Bible.

True Story Symbols

Creation

Rebellion

Promise

Redemption

Church

Restoration



ACT 1: CREATION

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God, the main character of this story, is the personal, all-powerful being who made everything that exists. He is the true ruler of the universe — lovingly providing for all that is under His care.

The kingdom, or sphere of authority, that God set up was not restricted to the heavens, but God powerfully, intentionally, and creatively spoke all of creation into existence:

- He precisely laid the foundations of the earth.
- He intentionally separated the waters from the land filling that land with beautiful flowers and unique animals.
- He splashed His creative canvas with many colors and fragrances that all declared His worth.

In five days, God masterfully set up a physical kingdom that was separate from Him, yet uniquely and personally cared for by Him. At the end of each day, God reflected on his work saying, “It is good.”

On the sixth day, God created the first people. God said, “Let us make man in our image,” and He formed the dust of the ground together and breathed into it the breath of life. Thus, the first humans were created and placed in a perfect garden where they could enjoy the good reign of this God. The people were decidedly different than the rest of creation in that they were given the responsibility of caring for the creation. God spoke to this first man, Adam, and told him to enjoy all that He had created: the animals, the flavors, the sights, and the work. Adam and all the humans were created with the ability to enjoy this wonderful environment God had fashioned. And they were created with the great task of reflecting the King’s goodness and greatness throughout all of creation.

God also made it clear to Adam that there were two trees in the center of the garden. One was the tree of life. The fruit from this tree was to be enjoyed and eaten just like the rest of the trees. The other tree, known as the knowledge of good and evil, was the only tree they were not to eat from. If Adam was to eat of this tree, he would surely die. This conversation between Adam and God continued as God described what it should look like for Adam to live in this garden. Adam had responsibilities to cultivate the garden and name the animals; operating under God’s authority to cultivate the world.

Adam went about the work God gave him to do. As he worked God said that it was not good for man to be alone—he needed a helper. So God caused a deep sleep to come over Adam, and by taking a rib from his side he created a woman named Eve for Adam to enjoy, love, protect, care for, and work alongside in relationship. When Adam woke up he broke into poetry and declared how amazed he was by what God had created. This first marriage was enjoyed without shame and guilt, they were naked in every sense and not the least bit afraid of rejection. God commissioned both the man and the woman with the task of cultivating the potential in his creation and to multiplying their family by having kids. After the sixth day and the creation of man in His own image, God reflected, “It is very good!”

Then on the seventh day God rested and reflected on the goodness of His creation. This was not the end of God's relationship with His creation, but rather it was only the beginning. Each day God would come down in the cool of the day and talk with Adam and Eve, teaching them the best possible way to live life, and showing them how to live under His good reign. Adam and Eve were able to enjoy both the goodness and greatness of their Creator and His creation. They worked faithfully in the garden, cultivating it and developing its potential to bring glory to God. They lived in perfect harmony in their relationships with God, His world, and each other. This truly was a good Kingdom!

ACT 2: REBELLION

One day a deceitful, lying serpent approached Eve and asked her a question. He asked, "Did God really say that you couldn't eat of any of the fruit in this garden?" Eve told him, "No, that's not what God said. We can eat from any tree in the garden. It's only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we are not allowed to eat from—or even touch—or we will definitely die."

The serpent lied to Eve and said, "You won't die! God just knows that as soon as you eat from that tree your eyes will be opened, and you will become just like Him. You will be able to determine what is right and wrong for yourselves."

"Hmm. I would be able to decide what is right and wrong?" Eve thought. She looked at the delicious fruit, contemplating the decision, and she believed the lies of the serpent over the words of the good God. She reached out her hand and ate some of the fruit. Then she gave some to her husband, Adam, who was there with her, and he ate it as well. In that moment their eyes were opened, and they were flooded with guilt and shame. They quickly tied fig leaves together to cover up their nakedness. They had rebelled and chosen to live outside the good reign of God and were immediately experiencing the devastating effects of that choice.

Later on that day, Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden as He always did that time of day. When they heard Him, their shame caused them to try to hide behind some of the nearby bushes.

God called out to them, "Adam, where are you?" Ashamed, Adam answered, "I heard you coming, and I was afraid because I was naked." God asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat the fruit that I told you not to?" Adam replied to God, "It was that woman that you gave to me... she handed me the fruit." Then God said to Eve, "How could you do this?" And Eve said, "The serpent tricked me into eating the fruit."

So God spoke to the serpent, "You are cursed because you have done this. You will now be the enemy of the woman and her offspring. You will bite at his heels, but he will crush your head!"

Then God turned to Adam and Eve. He knew that His good creation would be drastically affected by their choice to live outside His good reign. He knew that they would be

subjected to sickness, pain, suffering, and even death now as a result of their decisions. Because He is just and good and cannot allow injustice or rebellion to remain in His presence forever, He had to punish them for their rebellion.

He told them the consequences of their sin:

- Women will have great pain in bearing children.
- Men will struggle, toil, and sweat while trying to cultivate the land—only to get a little bit of food from it.
- They would both struggle for power in their relationship.
- They would die and return to the dust from which they were formed.

Even though He punished them with the consequences for their rebellion, God still loved and provided for them. He gave them clothes made from the skins of animals that they had previously named and cared for.

God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden and then sent mighty warrior angels to guard its entrance so that they would not be able to re-enter it. He also put a flaming sword in place to guard the Tree of Life so that people could no longer eat from it. God's good creation was now a drastically different place, twisted and distorted from how He had made it.

Now, what you have to understand is that the story doesn't end with the rebellion in the garden. Like any good story, there is hope. And the hope of this story lies in the promise that God is still on His mission.

In the midst of the realization that all of creation was now under a curse, Adam and Eve held onto that promise that the good God would some day crush the serpent through one of their descendants —a Victor had been promised.

After the disaster in the garden the rebellion continued to manifest itself. Adam and Eve had two sons. One murdered the other! It got so bad that at one point God looked at the people of the earth and saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil. He decided to send a great flood over the entire earth to wipe out this rebellion and wickedness out. But God was still on mission.

You see, He didn't wipe out every single human. There was still Noah and his family who were rescued from the flood. And after the water subsided, God put a rainbow in the sky and covenanted with Noah that He would never again destroy the earth.

You might think that Noah's descendants figured it out and started loving and following God. But the rebellion ran deep. Pride dominated the world. The people came together to build a tower to heaven in order to make a name for themselves and to avoid doing their job of spreading out caring for all of God's creation.

Rather than letting them have their prideful way, God was gracious to them and dispersed them across the earth by confusing their language. But God was still on His mission.

ACT 3: PROMISE

God did not just leave the nations to be confused and without hope forever, but he called one man, Abraham, and made a covenant with him. The covenant stated that God would bless Abraham and multiply his offspring so that his offspring would be a blessing all the nations. Abraham's family would be the means by which God would cure the world.

After many years of waiting, Abraham had a child named Isaac. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible, Abraham was instructed by God to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise. But at the last moment, God provided a ram for the sacrifice instead. The ram was substituted for Isaac, and the promise continued.

Isaac multiplied into a great nation called Israel. As generations passed, Israel became enslaved to the Egyptians, the strongest nation in the world. They were beaten, abused, mistreated and hopeless. They cried out in misery to God. And God heard their cries for help.

He rescued them by His mighty hand, using a man named Moses. This exodus from Egypt was the great act of God that Israel would always look back on to remember, "God is our Savior and will keep His covenant with us!"

Soon after they were rescued from slavery, God spoke to Moses on a mountaintop and told him the commandments they were to live by. However, just like Adam and Eve, the people of Israel didn't always obey these commandments. Because God always does what is good, right and perfect, he could not overlook their sins and the ultimate punishment for sin was death. A life must be given to pay for each person's disobedience. But God loved his people, so he provided a way for them to substitute the life of an innocent animal in place of their own. This pattern of an innocent life of a lamb being substituted for sin would continue long into the future.

You might think that after being rescued out of slavery, Israel would be the people who finally forsake their rebellion against God. But that wasn't the case. As they journeyed to the land God had promised them, they began grumbling against God. They even wished they could go back to their slavery in Egypt. At one point, they took all their gold jewelry, melted it down and made a golden calf to be their god. But even their rebellion could not thwart God, he was still on his mission to restore and redeem his creation.

After forty years, God raised up a man named Joshua to finally lead Israel out of the wilderness and into the beautiful land God had promised to them. God had rescued them out of slavery and into the safety of their own land.

You might think now that Israel was safe in their land, they would break the legacy of rebellion against God. Rather than worshipping the true God, they quickly fell into a devastating cycle of rebellion against God. Over the next centuries, they would fall further and further away from the God who had rescued and delivered them. But God was still on His mission.

Even though God had shown himself to be a good King, the people cried out for a human king. So God gave them kings. One such king was David. David ruled well and brought the nation together. As David was about to die, God made a covenant with David that one of his sons would reign over God's people forever.

David's sons did not follow after their father, and they certainly did not follow God. They turned to the many gods of the other nations and led the people away from God. Because of their rebellion, God brought other nations in to conquer and exile Israel from their land. All seemed lost. But God was still on mission.

In the midst of the exile, God spoke through prophets. He gave them a great promise that He would one day come and rescue His people. He would send a mighty, yet humble Servant to redeem them.

And so, God's people were left, waiting, longing, and hoping for the day when God would rescue them.

INTERLUDE

First the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans—for centuries these empires had, deported, exiled, minimized, and enslaved God's people—and the Israelites' God didn't seem to do anything to stop them!

Would God answer? Would he rescue? After all...

- He promised Adam that He would send one to make things right.
- He promised Noah He would never destroy the earth.
- He promised Abraham that his descendants, the people of Israel, would be blessed.
- He rescued their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt.
- He blessed them and gave them the land through Joshua.
- He promised David a son who would rule forever.
- He promised to rescue His people out of exile.

For over 400 years they were waiting... longing... hoping... for God to rescue.

God's people began looking for the Messiah, a man sent by God, to be their King. Over and over, their hopes would rise with a great political figure or some powerful revolutionary. But over and over, the self-proclaimed would-be-Messiahs failed. Over and over, their hopes were dashed.

This was beginning to seem like a story in search of an ending.

ACT 4: REDEMPTION

But God was still on His mission. On a quiet night in Bethlehem, the same city King David had grown up in a millennium before, a little child was born. The child's name was Jesus, a translation of Joshua into the local language. On the night this child was born, a myriad of angels came to herald, or to welcome, this child into the world. These weren't pudgy little baby angels with harps. They were mighty warrior angels who had come to announce the arrival of the one and true King to the world. All they could say in utter worship was, "Glory to God in the highest!"

That baby grew into a man. Around the time he was 30 years old, He began to tell people that He was the King they had been waiting for. He told people, "There is good news! No more waiting, no more longing, no more hoping in false Messiahs! Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand now."

Jesus began teaching people what life was going to be like under the rule of this true King in His forever Kingdom. He not only taught people how to live in this Kingdom, but He gave them a foretaste of what the Kingdom is like:

- In His Kingdom, there is no blindness. He gave sight to the blind.
- In His Kingdom, there is no sickness. He healed the sick.
- In His Kingdom, there is no sin. He forgave sin.
- In His Kingdom, there are no marginalized. He befriended sinners.
- In His Kingdom, nature is at peace. He calmed the storm.
- In His Kingdom, there are no evil powers. He cast out demons.
- In His Kingdom, there is no death. He raised the dead.

Many people followed Jesus. They wanted to be a part of this kind of Kingdom. They were starting to believe that He was finally God's answer to their longings. Of the many people who followed him, He selected twelve disciples He would train to carry out His mission after he left. These men dropped everything to follow Jesus on His way to the throne. They believed Jesus was going to overturn the Romans, set God's people free, and bring in the golden age of peace. They wanted to be near. So they followed Jesus. They loved Jesus. They learned from Jesus. They served Jesus.

But not everyone loved Jesus. To the Jewish leaders, He was a rebel, flipping their religious system upside down after they had worked so hard to build it up. To the Romans, He was a rebel, an insurrectionist. To make matters worse, He claimed He was God. So, needless to say, not everyone loved Jesus.

After three years of proclaiming the Kingdom and setting himself up as the promised King, the true Messiah, Jesus came into Jerusalem (the City of David) to celebrate the Passover. The Passover was the holiday when the people of Israel remembered God's great saving act of rescuing them out of Egyptian slavery centuries before. Many people welcomed Jesus into the city, believing He was the King who would do the next great saving act of rescuing them out of Roman slavery.

Some of the religious leaders made a plan to murder Jesus. They conspired with Judas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, exactly how it would go down. They turned Him over to the Romans calling him an insurrectionist. They demanded He, the one and true King of the earth, be beaten and killed. Not just killed, but crucified. Crucifixion is one of the most torturous, humiliating, and excruciating deaths ever devised.

So on a little hill outside Jerusalem they crucified Jesus. The one and true King of the world was being murdered. Hanging on a cross was the One many had been hoping, waiting, longing for. John looked on in horror. The King willingly hung on a cross and died... according to plan.

According to plan? Surely not! How could that be? Wasn't the plan that, as King, He would ascend to a throne, wear a crown of jewels, and every living creature would bow down before Him? The plan couldn't possibly have been Jesus hanging on a cross, wearing a crown of thorns, and having His enemies spit and curse at Him.

The one and true King was now the crucified and dead King. He had become a victim of the rebellion in the Garden of Eden just like the rest of creation. He seemed no different.

But God was still on His mission. The cross wasn't outside of God's plan to redeem and restore His creation. It was the white hot center of it.

Three days later, some women went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. He was gone! They told His disciples who ran as fast as they could to the tomb. The disciples found it... empty. Soon they would learn that Jesus was indeed... alive!

The crucified and dead King showed that He absolutely was the one and true King. He did not succumb to the powers and effects of that original rebellion. He rose from the grave. He defeated death! He conquered the curse! And He crushed Satan's head in the process!

Jesus was alive. The one and true King had decisively defeated the enemies of the Kingdom. A new day had dawned. What had been lost at Adam's rebellion in the Garden was now starting to be put right.

ACT 5: CHURCH

After His death and resurrection Jesus gathered his followers back together. He began to show them from their history and their sacred writings that what had happened to Him was all according to plan. God was still on a redemptive mission, and He was sending them out to announce his reign to the world.

Over the next 40 days Jesus showed them that His death and resurrection were needed to :

- Take the penalty for their sin on Himself.
- Defeat Satan.
- Redeem them from their slavery to sin.
- Secure the renewal of His creation.

Jesus' friends couldn't have been more excited. They were sitting there in Jerusalem with Jesus, the one and true resurrected King. He was teaching them. He was about to take His throne and usher in the end of history. Finally, what they had been waiting, hoping, and longing for was finally here!

Not so fast. Jesus told Peter, John and the others that it was not yet time, the story wasn't finished yet. There were more people who still needed to hear this good news about the victorious king and His good Kingdom. It was not yet time for His Kingdom to come in full. Jesus' disciples learned that they and their friends were going to be sent out into the world as ambassadors.

Just as those angels had heralded the good news of the Jesus' birth so many years before...

Just as Jesus had heralded the news of His Kingdom and showed people what life is like in His Kingdom....

They too, were going to be sent out to herald the good news of the true King's life, death, and resurrection. Together their lives and their voices would be a foretaste of and an invitation into the Kingdom life.

Before he ascended, Jesus told his disciples, "I am leaving you now, but I will come again one day. But for now, while you are here, I will send the Spirit of God to live in and among you. He will empower you for your mission to bring the good news of Me and My Kingdom, making new disciples of Me in every nation." And then He left, ascending to the right hand of the Father.

Jesus' followers (about 120 of them) sat in Jerusalem waiting for the promised Spirit to empower them to live out the mission Jesus had called them into. They waited and prayed as days went by. Finally, on the tenth day, the Spirit arrived with a great rush of wind, and tongues of fire were seen leaping above their heads. They were united, empowered, and directed to live out the mission Jesus had given them. In order to tell all these different people, they were empowered to speak in languages that they had never spoken before in their lives—so that people could hear the good news.

At this time, there were many people coming into town because it was the time of Pentecost, a Jewish feast that drew people to Jerusalem from all over to celebrate the end of the spring harvest and God's grace in providing for them. When those people heard the great sound of the wind, they came rushing to see what was going on. Peter and his friends, empowered by the Spirit, started to connect the dots for people, showing how their longings for a Deliverer, a true and perfect King, were fulfilled in Jesus, the One whom they had killed. He was truly the Messiah, the Deliverer—and they had to repent and believe this good news. Thousands of people believed the true story that day.

As time went on, Jesus' disciples were sent out from Jerusalem. They spread all over the known world. They told as many people as they could about the one and true King and what He had done. They set up communities of people who believed and lived according to this true story wherever they went. These were called churches, and those who followed this King were called Christians. Jesus' followers began to orient all of their lives around this true story devoting their lives to *servicing* each other, being a *family* that was not defined by cultural norms or racial boundaries but by their crucified and risen Savior, *learning* from the Scriptures and each other, and living as *missionaries* to the world.

Many of those who followed Jesus were exiled, tortured, and even murdered for living their lives according to the true story. But still the good news of a risen Savior spread, bringing freedom and forgiveness to people across the world. As the good news spread through the cities and out into rural communities people of all walks of life began to see the truth of the story. One such man, Saul, was a religious leader whose life mission was to kill these followers of Jesus. Saul encountered the risen Christ, and his life was transformed by the power of the gospel to the point that he became one of the main missionaries we learn from even today. (You might know him by his new name, Paul.)

As these communities spread across the world, some of Jesus' followers who had witnessed the risen Christ were directed by the Holy Spirit to write letters to these communities, teaching them how to live faithfully on mission. They answered their questions, corrected their errors, and redirected them back to Jesus and His mission which was now theirs to carry out by the power of the Spirit.

Through the church, we see that God is still on His redemptive mission. It is as the church lives out her mission to declare and demonstrate the gospel that people are able to see what it is to live under the good reign of God and come to worship King Jesus.

This is the act of the story in which we find ourselves today.

ACT 6: RESTORATION

But the story isn't over. One of Jesus' followers, a man named John, was imprisoned on a small island. He sat in his prison cell and prayed to God. He wondered if and when God would rescue His people.

God spoke to him through a dream, a revelation. In a sequence of stories with rich imagery, God made John aware of the reality that God was still sovereignly accomplishing His mission on the earth through the Church. Even though God's people were suffering and it seemed like the enemy was winning, all was not lost. God revealed to John that He was actively accomplishing His purposes and that they would ultimately culminate in a full and final victory.

One day Jesus will return — not just as the sacrificial lamb that was slain, but as the conquering Lion. John paints this descriptive picture for us with rich imagery: Jesus will return on a great white warhorse like a mighty general returning from battle. He has a great sword of righteousness coming out of His mouth. He has a tattoo on his thigh that says "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." He is wearing a crown of many jewels. And He is wearing a brilliant white robe. And the hem of His robe has been drenched in blood.

Jesus will return for one final battle where He will finally and fully defeat Satan and the powers of darkness, sending them into a lake of fire where they will remain forever.

Then Jesus will judge every person. Those who decided to choose death, who rebelled against God's rule and never repented, will be cast away, forever missing out on God's renewed creation that is to come. Those who were a part of the redeemed community, who had been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, will spend forever with Him in what is to come...

And John saw it! He saw a picture of creation restored! He saw everything bad come undone:

- He saw all the effects of the curse, reversed.
- All the twisting of God's original intention, untwisted.
- All the tears, wiped away.
- Death, no more.
- No mourning, no crying, no pain.
- All the false idols, false gods, false saviors, given up to forever worship the true Savior.

He saw a picture of eternity. There were no clouds, no harps, no vague other-worldliness.

- There was a King.
- There was a renewed creation.
- There were people from every tribe, tongue, and nation bowing down and living their lives in worship to King Jesus.

Not only did he see it, but he heard it. He heard a mighty voice declare from the throne, "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. Behold I am making all things new!"

Seeing and hearing all these things, John was again convinced that God is still on His mission. He knew that Jesus was using His Church to accomplish his purposes in His world. And nothing could thwart that.

John wrote down what he had seen and heard so that the rest of the Church could have the same hope, security, and urgency that he now had. He ended his writing with this, final words: "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Describe how you think the perfect world would look.

Act 1: Creation

Describe the peace that existed in the garden.

What was man created to do?

What do you learn about God in this story? About people? About God's world?

Act 2:

What truth did man exchange for a lie?

How was peace destroyed?

Where do you see God's grace in this story?

What do you learn about God in this story? About people? About God's world?

Act 3:

What is God's promise to Israel?

What was Israel supposed to do? Did they do it?

What do you learn about God in this story? About people? About God's world?

Act 4:

What is God's mission?

What is a "foretaste of the kingdom?"

How did Jesus give the people a foretaste of the kingdom?

Why is the death and resurrection significant?

Act 5:

What is the mission of the church?

How does the church give the world a "foretaste of the kingdom?"

How do we find our place in this act of the story?

Act 6:

What excites you about the end of the story?

What do you learn about God in this story? About people? About God's world?

Is God's mission worth dying for? Is it worth living for?