



# TRUE STORY

SERIES: EPIC INTRODUCTION

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1st Message, Genesis 1:1  
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As most of you know, today kicks off our nine-month series called EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world. Our approach for these nine months is to look at the overall story of the Bible. So this morning, we're going to spend some time talking about stories.

Earlier this spring, my wife and I took our children to the happiest place on earth: Disneyland. I used to go to Disney World as a child, and in my mind, one ride stands out as representing Disney: *It's A Small World*. That ride just feels like it is Disney.

So first thing in the morning, I woke my children up with what some people consider to be the easiest song to get stuck in your head: "It's a Small World After All." We ate a quick breakfast, walked to the park, and as soon as the gates opened made our way to *It's A Small World*. The ride was exactly the same mix of magical and annoying as I remembered it. But this time I noticed something new about this ride. I noticed that it tells a story.

At the beginning of the ride, you see dolls of children from different parts of the world. There is the European section with Swedes and yodelers. There is the Asian section with Korean drums, Chinese pavilions and Japanese shrines. There is the African section, the Latin American section, and the North American section. All of the children are singing the song in their own language in their own countries. Then at the end of the ride, you move into a huge room with clouds and white streamers. Children from all over the world are in this room together. They are all dressed in white. And they are all singing in unison.

This ride tells a story that begins with different children from different cultures separated by their differences. The story ends with them united in peace, dressed in white, singing in English. But how do they get from being separated to being unified? The song tells you how. Listen to the lyrics.

It's a world of laughter,  
A world of tears.  
It's a world of hopes,  
And a world of fears.

There's so much that we share,  
That it's time we're aware,  
It's a small world after all.

This ride debuted in 1964 at the World's Fair in New York shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In response to a world that was reeling from two world wars and trying to figure out how to live together in peace, this song has a simple but powerful message: if we just realize that we're all the same, then we can get along. Our world is divided by race and culture and language and geography. But we can live in peace if we realize that it's a small world after all. We're really all the same. That's all it takes to live in peace.

This story has had a tremendous impact on our culture in the past several decades. In fact, I'd say it is the dominant version of how to live in a multi-cultural world. This story affects politics, families, religion, and schools. You don't have to look far to find this story everywhere.

That's because stories change how we live our lives. They explain the past. They give us a future. They offer meaning and purpose. They lay out goals and describe ways of achieving those goals.

*It's A Small World* does all of those things.

All of us live our lives with big stories in the background. Some people live with the American dream in their background: if you work hard enough, you can succeed. Others live with the story of how a good education delivers a good life. Many people live with a negative story in their background. Maybe it's the victim who never has the opportunities that others have. Or the person who lives a hopeless life because they are paying for past decisions.

Whatever big story is in your background, it helps to explain a lot about you. It gives shape to the decisions you make, the paths you choose, and the outcomes you expect. It guides your relationships. It tells you how to interpret things that happen to you. And it tells you what your future might hold.

These big stories are incredibly powerful. That is why there is one very important question we want to consider

this morning. Are you living by the right story? Is it capable of guiding your life? Does it present an accurate picture of the world? Does it help you? And ultimately, is it true?

Is the story that guides your life the true story?

For the next nine months at PBC, we are embarking on a journey through the Bible in order to accomplish one simple task. We want to understand the big story that the Bible tells.

You probably realize that the Bible contains stories. What some people don't realize is that it actually is one big story. In fact, this is what I find most incredible about the Bible: the way all of its parts over thousands of years and dozens of authors connect into one coherent narrative. One of our goals over the next nine months is to try and get a feel for that story in a way that is harder to do when you're looking at individual parts.

But that's not our only goal. There is a reason we want to understand the big story. A big story that guides our life is like a sports stadium that we live inside. It shapes everything we do. We want to understand the Bible's big story because we want to know how it can shape what we do.

So we're going to be asking two questions over the next nine months and they are really the questions that we are always asking around here. What is the Bible all about and how does it change my life?

It is a great tragedy to live your life based on a story and then to find out that you picked the wrong one. To come to the end of everything and to realize that it's not actually true that if you work hard, you'll make it. Or it's not actually true that you are destined for failure. Or to realize that you were so convinced the world was against you that you couldn't recognize the people who were desperately trying to help you.

This morning, as we kick off this epic undertaking, my goal is to convince you that this story we're going to be looking at is worth considering. I want us to walk away convinced that it is really important to live our lives based on the true story. And I want us to consider that the story of the Bible must just be it. Whether you have been a Christian for a long time, whether you've never heard much about the Bible or whether you're coming back after a long time away, all of us are shaped by false stories in our background. We all need the true story.

How do you evaluate a story to see if it is compelling?

You start it. You read the first page. So we're going to start at the beginning. We'll be looking at the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. They are seven simple words in Hebrew. My hope is that these seven words will convince us that this story really is epic.

## **“In the beginning”**

The first words of the Bible are what the first words of any grand story ought to be. It's only one word in Hebrew, but three words in English. It is simple, but I think we'll see that these words make a powerful claim. In the beginning.

Beginnings are important.

The Hebrew word for “beginning” always describes something special; the first son; the first batch of produce from a harvest; the earliest season of a king's reign. The word also describes where something comes from. One proverb claims “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Beginnings are important.

Facebook recently introduced a new design to their profile pages called Timeline, where your page runs like a vertical listing of events in time order. If you scroll down to the very bottom of the page, you'll see a little icon of a baby in a diaper with the simple word “Born.” Every single one of us began somewhere. We were all born. And the circumstances of our early years continue to affect all of us today.

Beginnings are important.

Here is the incredible thing about the Bible. The Bible claims to tell us about the beginning. Not just our beginning. THE BEGINNING: the beginning of everything. And if there is going to be a story that claims to help us understand who we are and why we're here and what it is all about, then it has to give us an account of how it all began. Any story with any power has a beginning. The Bible claims to tell us about the beginning of everything.

The Bible isn't the only source to claim knowledge of the beginning. Throughout history, there has been lots of competition for stories about the beginning. The Babylonians believed their god Marduk defeated a sea monster and created the earth and sky by cutting her in two. The Greeks believed that Chaos had two children, Night and Death. Then mysteriously, Love was born as well. One Roman story claims that the earth began when

God rolled matter into a ball and separated opposite forces.

For most of history, people have had to pick from competing stories of how things began; until now.

Almost a century ago, an intellectual attack began on this word that opens up the Hebrew Scriptures. People started saying that the Bible claims to tell things from the beginning, but that its account of the beginning is false. People claimed that the Bible got it wrong. The Bible said that everything started with a God who created, but science said otherwise. And in the popularity contest of the century, people chose science over the Bible.

Just recently, a YouTube video by Bill Nye, “the science guy,” became popular where he lamented the ideas of creationism. He claimed that no responsible adult should teach their children creationism and that the whole idea would be gone in a few centuries. The title of his video is “Creationism is not appropriate for children.” This battle still rages today.

But the whole debate has gone wrong. People have been caught up arguing for a certain biblical interpretation of how the Bible describes the beginning. Christians have spent so much energy fighting about the method of creation. In reality, the most important message of this first section of Genesis is not how it all began, but who began it all. The debate isn't really about a six day creationism or a much longer period of evolution. The debate should be about who is responsible for the beginning.

Now, “*how it all began*” is still an interesting topic. Because it is so closely linked to “*who began it all*”, it is worth talking about. Those are important topics. But they aren't the most important topics of Genesis 1.

The tragedy of the past century is not that most people believe in evolution. The tragedy of the past century is that many people believe that no one is behind it all. No one was there at the beginning. That to even speak the words “in the beginning” is foolish and naïve and irresponsible.

The result is that a lot of people have thrown out the story that the Bible tells. A lot of people threw out these first words of the Scriptures: “in the beginning.” We live in a culture that has rejected the Bible's version of how it all began and replaced it with a story that lacks a beginning. But without a beginning we have no story. Our culture has all but given up hope in the idea of a story because it has rejected the idea of a beginning.

When that happens, all meaning is lost. You drift

around. Nothing makes sense. Life isn't rooted in anything. Consider this quote from a book called *Trainspotting* which was later turned into a movie.

*We realize that we're all going to die, without really finding out the big answers. We develop all those long-winded ideas which just interpret the reality of our lives in different ways, without really extending our body of worthwhile knowledge, about the big things, the real things. Basically, we live a short disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up our lives with things like careers and relationships to delude ourselves that it isn't all totally pointless.*<sup>1</sup>

We're all going to die without really finding out the big answers. Without a beginning, how can the end make sense? How can the middle make sense? How can anything make sense? This is what happens when you don't have a big story.

We need a story with a beginning. We need to know about how it started because without that we can't make sense of anything. But believing in the beginning is hard for a lot of us because many of us have lost hope in a beginning that makes sense. Some of us, even if we've been Christians for a long time about so confused about the discussion around creation that we don't think about the who of the story. Some of us are so wrapped up in ourselves that it seems meaningless or irrelevant to believe in the beginning of all things.

What about you? Are you willing to consider a story that starts at the beginning? I'm not asking whether you believe in six days of creation or theistic evolution or anything like that. I'm asking whether you believe in the beginning. That this book speaks of the absolute beginning. Or do you feel like you're just moving through time without any guidance or purpose or direction?

All of us need to know that we have a story that begins at the beginning. This is one of the most important things about this story. It tells us how it all began. And because it does, it helps us to make sense of everything. It's exactly what we need.

## “God”

A story has a beginning, but it also has a main character. And as we continue reading this story, we meet our main character. Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God...”

I know. I'm a bit disappointed too. If I'm honest, I'd

much rather a story that started out “in the beginning, Paul...” I’d much rather a story where I was the main character.

When I was 10, my sister gave me a book for my birthday that was a personalized book. It had to be mail ordered and printed up because it had my name on every page. I was the main character; the name of my cat was the name of the cat in the story and the name of my friends were the names of the supporting characters in the story.

That’s the kind of story I think I want. I want it to be about me and my life with my cat and my friends. Because I not-so-secretly believe that the world revolves around me. I’m at the center of my own story. Why shouldn’t I be at the center of THE STORY?

But after I get over my initial disappointment, I become grateful that this story doesn’t center around me. I have to admit, as much as I want to deny it, that things existed before I existed. So I have to admit that there is something else. And if there is something else, whatever story I believe should take that into account.

Think about this statement: “My mother was born in Louisiana.” That’s a pretty normal, unremarkable thing to say unless you really don’t like Louisiana. But it’s actually quite a remarkable thing for me to say. Here I am in 2012 describing something that happened before I even existed. That’s an audacious thing to say. How do I know where my mother was born? More than that, I’m not just describing something that happened before I existed, but I’m describing the beginning of the person who gave me my beginning. That simple statement is a philosopher’s field day.

That’s the kind of audacious statement that the Bible begins with. Tradition says that a man named Moses wrote this. So Moses writes, “In the beginning God.” But how can Moses say that? How can he possibly describe the beginning? And not just describe the beginning, but claim to say something meaningful about the Divine being that caused the beginning. This is an incredibly audacious statement. The author of these words is claiming to tell the story of God himself. No wonder people think Christians are arrogant. It is an incredible thing to claim to know who made all of this.

We will spend a lot of time over the next nine months getting to know this God who is the main character of this story. At times we will see him do things that are awe-inspiring. At other times we will see him do things that confuse us and we don’t understand. All we know about

him so far is that He was there before us. He was in the beginning.

And that’s exactly the kind of story we need if it’s going to help us at all. The American Dream is a powerful story, but countries are born, countries die, and they never stay the same. We need something bigger than the American Dream. If there is a story that I can base my life around, it needs to be bigger than me. It needs to be bigger than us. But if it’s bigger than us, it also needs to be bigger than our parents and bigger than their parents and so forth and so forth. It needs to be bigger than all of us.

For the next nine months, we have the opportunity to get immersed in a story that isn’t all about us. If you are anything like me, that is an incredibly difficult thing to do. We want the story to be about us. We want to be the center. But here’s the surprising twist that this story reveals: you can only find yourself within the story of another. The first shall be last. If you’re willing to lose yourself, you’ll end up finding yourself.

What about you? Are you willing to base your life on a story that isn’t about you? Some of you say that you are, but live your lives as if you are the main character. I know I do a lot of the time. But being the main character is tough work. It’s demanding, it’s stressful, and it rarely works out.

The truth is that recognizing God as the main character is incredibly freeing. That’s why I call this an opportunity. We can let go of the illusion that my life is the most important thing around. That it all depends on me. That the audience hangs on my every word. When we do that, when we believe in a story that is about God instead of being about us, we find that we are free from so many of the things that usually weigh us down.

Four words into this story and I’m hoping that you are seeing that it is the kind of story that we need. We need a story that begins at the beginning. We need a story that is bigger than us.

### **“created the heavens the earth”**

And now we get to the last few words in the opening of our story. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth ...”

The Bible tells a story that claims to start from the beginning. It claims that in the beginning there was someone who is like us but who is not us. And now it claims that that someone created everything. This story just gets



more and more bold. This is a story about the One who is responsible for everything being here.

What's particularly important about these last words is the scope of them. This story is about a God who created the earth that we live on and the heavens that we long for. Everything that we understand and everything we want to understand; our life and our longing.

Almost every culture has a deep connection with the place they live. Whether it's the first mortgage for a young American family or centuries of families who held farmland in India; we are rooted to our homes. The earth is our home. It is where we live. Everything about our life takes place in a place and except for a very small number of us, all of that has happened on this earth. The earth is what we know. It is where we live.

After I traveled to India for the first time, I was fascinated by the culture and I read a book that was recommended to me about the creation of the modern states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh that all had roots in an incredible event in 1947 referred to as Partition. All of this was very interesting to me. It was especially interesting because I had been to India and I had seen the relationships between Hindus and Moslems that motivated a lot of those politics. It was interesting, but it wasn't personal because it wasn't my story. It didn't have to do with my land.

When I went back to India after having read this book, I asked people about this process and talked to people who had lived through it or whose parents had relocated as part of it. For them, partition was their story. It was more than something they had read about. It spoke to their experience.

This story of the Bible is about a God who created the earth. That's our land. This is our story. For us, this story in the Bible is about our experience because it is about a God who created the earth that we know and live upon. This story is personal to us. It is about our life here in this place.

But this verse also says that God created the heavens; the skies that the birds fly in; the vast space that the stars light up. Just as land has always meant home to people, people have always looked up as a way of looking into something beyond. The heavens have always been where people have looked for answers about mysteries too great to find out on our own. We have always longed to understand the heavens.

Our American space program recently celebrated an historic voyage. We built a robotic vehicle and sent it over

300 million miles to land safely on Mars. We consider this a huge step toward understanding the heavens. But we have a long way to go. We made it to another planet. But the closest star is over 23 million-million miles. That's like going to Mars 80,000 times and that's just the closest star. The farthest star is 3 billion times farther.<sup>2</sup>

We made it to Mars and that is a huge accomplishment. But there is a whole lot of the heavens that remain to be explored. To say we are only scratching the surface is a huge understatement.

Yet we long to know the heavens. We long to understand what we don't understand. We know there are ideas and places that we don't know yet, but we want to know them. This story that the Bible begins is about a God who created the earth that we know but also the heavens that we long to know.

If this story is going to be compelling it has to speak to both. It has to talk about my life: working hard at a job, times of rest, complicated relationships, personal successes and failures, tragedies that come out of nowhere, and little moments of happiness.

But it also has to talk about my longings. Peace and joy. Forgiveness. Purpose. Direction. Majesty. Sacrifice. Glory.

A story that speaks of my life and longings is a good story. A story that brings them together and makes connections between them is a better story. A story that explains the one who is behind both of them is a great story. That is the kind of story the Bible tells. God created the heavens AND the earth.

Do you see why this story is worth considering? We need a story that has a beginning. We need a story that is bigger than us. But we need a story that speaks to us. That helps to explain our life and our longings.

## **“A new heaven and a new earth”**

There's one last part of the story that we don't get from this verse. But it is an important part of making this story the kind of story that we need to hear. Stories end. Some end well. Others not so well. If our culture has lost the sense that its story has any kind of a beginning, it has also lost the sense that its story has a future; at least any kind of a future worth participating in.

We need a story with a future. And without giving away the end of this epic story that we're about to start

exploring, listen to one verse from the last book of the Bible. Revelation 21:1 says this, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.”

This story about a God who created what we know and want to know has a future. If it were just a story about a God who created and then walked away, it wouldn't be the kind of story that we need. But it's not. It's a story of a God who is active and involved and doing things. It's a story of a God who creates in the beginning and a God who restores in the end.

Notice that this story ends where it begins. Only it's better. At the end of the story we have just what we have in the beginning, but they are new. It's not a completely unfamiliar ending, but neither is it the same as it is now. It is the heaven and the earth. But it is new.

I don't know about you, but I need a story of restoration. I know that my life doesn't look the way I want it to look. I don't treat people the way I should. I don't experience the kind of life I wish I could. I get lonely and angry and frustrated and tired and sad. I need a story about transformation. I need a story about things being made new. I need a story about a God who fixes what has gone wrong in me and in this world.

This is that kind of story. And the way God fixes everything is the best part. He steps in. He gets dirty. He is relentless. He is selfless. He is surprising. And in the end, he makes everything new.

More than anything we need a story of restoration. Looking around the heavens and the earth right now can be a bit depressing. People used to think that things are always getting better, but only politicians talk that way anymore. We've heard a lot of stories in the past few weeks from politicians about restoring America.

But we need a bigger promise of restoration. Every four years we vote for someone who promises to fix the world's problems before his term is up. And every four years we are disappointed that we don't seem to be any closer. We need a story about a God who steps in and fixes things for good. We need a future.

We need a story that begins at the beginning. We need a story that is bigger than us. We need a story that speaks to us. And we need a story about restoration. We need a story like the one this book tells.

## Conclusion

It's hard to grasp a story as big as the story that the Bible tells. To help us grasp it during this series, we've divided the story in ten distinct eras that mark significant sections of the story. Each era has a title and an icon that we'll be using throughout EPIC to help us keep our place. After singing a song, we're going to listen to parts of this story being read from the Bible (Catalog No. 20120909a) as we move through each era. I encourage you to listen carefully and consider how this story moves from beginning to end.

I started off this morning talking about what might be the most famous ride at Disneyland: *It's a Small World*. I suggested that this ride tells a simple story. The story begins with people separated by culture and language and geography. It ends with people united in harmony and love. And the way this story gets from the beginning to the end is simple. *There's so much that we share / That it's time we're aware / It's a small world after all.*

This ride suggests that if we all just realize how much we share then the story of the world can end up in that white room with people of many cultures and nations and languages singing together in harmony and peace. The question is whether that story is true. Is that all it takes?

As it turns out, many people estimate that the song from this ride is the most performed and translated musical piece of all time. More people in the world have heard this song in their language more times than any other song. A close runner up is *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*, but that song tells a very different story. So if the goal is to make everyone in the world aware that there is so much that we share, that song is doing a pretty good job.

How close are we to that white room? Look around our world. It's a compelling idea that that's all it takes to get there, but honestly, it doesn't really seem to be true. If we could just get everyone to come to Anaheim or Orlando and ride that ride, everything would get better; or not.

Our culture is full of stories that are false; stories that mislead; stories that may sound plausible at first, but end up failing in the long run. I hope this morning you have been moved to consider the big story that the Bible tells. It is exactly the kind of story we need. It starts at the beginning. It's bigger than us. It speaks to us. And it offers hope.

But most of all, it is the true story. It makes sense of everything and helps all of who we are and what we do make sense. It is worth wrapping your life around. Come

along with us and see what you think. It is an epic story. It is the astonishing story of God and the world. It is the true story. And it changes everything.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Irvine Welsh, Trainspotting.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1214189/Furthest-star-discovered-13billion-light-years-Earth.html>.