



CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

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Eight months ago, Paul Taylor began our journey through the Scriptures with these words:

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.

Paul urged us to consider, by contrast, the biblical story, the Genesis-to-Revelation story.

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.

Indeed, the biblical story is the true story. It's like a fairy tale; it's too good to be true, but it's true nonetheless. Today, we make an end. First, let's take a look back.

A World Made

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth: all creation. He created humanity in his image—that is, as his regents to rule over the earth. The first humans, however, rejected God and his rule to establish their own rule, independent of God, thus opening the door for Satan, sin, and death and sending all creation into a tailspin. Human rebellion created a cosmic crisis, but God put in motion a plan to restore both humanity and creation.

A Family Born

The plan featured the family of a man named Abraham. God told Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” The descendants that came from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the nation of Israel—became God's new humanity. Would Israel succeed where the first humans failed?

A People Freed

When the nation of Egypt enslaved Israel, things looked bleak for Abraham's descendants—and also for humanity, for that matter, because God's plan to restore humanity and creation centered on Israel. In a miraculous display of power, God liberated his people from bondage through Moses and led them into the wilderness. There, he entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, giving her the law, which included instructions for the tabernacle, the place of worship, which represented God's ruling presence with his people and featured regular sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. Just like the first humans, however, Israel rebelled against God's rule, worshiping a golden calf.

A Home Given

Despite Israel's rebellion, God led her to the land he had promised to Abraham, the land of Canaan, which became known as the Promised Land. Joshua, the new leader, led the conquest of the Promised Land. After Joshua's death, leadership among the twelve tribes became diffused among judges, or tribal leaders, and the people quickly lapsed into idolatry, worshiping the gods of the surrounding peoples. Everyone did as he or she saw fit, and the need for a covenant-keeping king was observed.

A King Crowned

After the people chose Saul, a deeply flawed leader, as king, God chose David. David was a vast improvement over Saul, and though he too was flawed, Israel began to see its destiny as wrapped up in the king. David's son, Solomon, assumed the throne after his father's death, and he built the temple, the permanent place of worship in Jerusalem. Solomon, however, was drawn away from worship of the Lord by foreign women, and after his death, the kingdom divided into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

A Nation Banished

The kings of the north, and the northern kingdom as

a whole, preferred other gods to the Lord, and the Lord raised up Assyria to conquer the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. The southern kings and the southern kingdom also worshiped other gods, and finally the Lord raised up Babylon to conquer the southern kingdom and destroy the temple in 586 B.C. Thus, Judah suffered the covenant curse, removal from the Promised Land, as many of its members went into exile in Babylon.

A House Rebuilt

What about God's plan to restore humanity and creation through Israel? Was there still hope for Israel as the Lord's covenant people? The Lord, through his prophets, promised to bring his people back to the land. The Medes and the Persians, who conquered Babylon, allowed the exiles to return and rebuild their temple, though it paled in comparison to Solomon's temple. Moreover, God's people were still subject to foreign rule, and the return from exile never matched the expectations of the prophets. They returned to the land, yes, but they remained in exile. The prophets and the psalmists, though, held out hope for something greater and grander, something that looked like a new exodus, something that might be called the true return from exile, and those hopes, increasingly, focused on the hoped-for coming of a king whom the Israelites called the Messiah, the Anointed One.

The Savior Appears

Some five hundred years after the return from exile, a virgin named Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to a son, Jesus of Nazareth. God himself declared Jesus, when he was baptized by the prophet John in the Jordan River, to be his Son, the king of God's people: the Messiah. Jesus proclaimed, especially through the use of parables, that God's kingdom—his healing, loving rule—was breaking into this world, that the new exodus and the true return from exile were at hand, all of which meant that God's plan to restore humanity and creation was reaching a climax. He gathered twelve disciples, who represented the twelve tribes, thus remaking Israel. Although God was with him, so that he healed people, cast out demons, and even raised the dead, his inclusive vision of Israel offended nationalists such as the Pharisees, who tended to oppose Roman occupation, and his popularity rattled the Sadducees, who tended to cooperate with Roman occupation.

The leaders of Israel therefore, perceiving Jesus to be a threat, handed him over to the Romans, the superpower of the day, who complied by crucifying him. On the cross,

Jesus fulfilled God's plans to rescue the world through Israel by absorbing the sin of the world. Jesus, the faithful Israelite, succeeded where Israel and her kings failed. God therefore vindicated Jesus, raising him from the dead, after which Jesus told his disciples to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After his final instructions, Jesus ascended to heaven, from which he has reigned ever since as Lord of the world.

The Church Formed

Indeed, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, now called apostles, thus renewing the people of God and empowering them to preach and implement the gospel, the good news of God's victory over Satan, sin, and death in the death, resurrection, and enthronement of his Son, Jesus Christ. The risen Jesus called a new apostle, Paul, to preach the gospel to the nations, plant churches, and teach the new worshiping communities, commonly called churches, about the implications of the gospel. Paul did the latter not least through the writing of letters, which convey a certain "now and not-yet" theology. Yes, God's healing, loving rule had broken into the world, but it had not yet been established. Paul saw Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ as one people—in fact, as the continuation of true Israel—and much of his writings are concerned with nurturing such unity. The church constitutes God's new temple, the place of his dwelling.

Although we live almost 2,000 years after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves here, in this era, between the in-breaking and consummation of the kingdom of God. This is our time. Empowered by the Spirit, we worship God, together and as individuals, and bring God's healing, loving rule to the world in anticipation of the final establishment of the kingdom.

The World Remade

What comes next? The apostle John, in the book of Revelation, envisions the destruction of evil and the establishment of God's kingdom: the new creation (the new heaven and the new earth), which features the new city (the new Jerusalem) and the new garden (the new Eden). The new creation will be big enough for dreams, the new city will be beautiful beyond description, and the new garden will be bursting with life. We will be sons and daughters and servants of the king—the beloved of God who know we're the beloved of God. In the new creation, we will be and do exactly what we're supposed to be and do, which will be one and the same with what we want to do. God's plan to restore humanity and creation will

be complete. In fact, it will be more than complete, for the new creation, by John's description of it, will be better than the first creation.

Great story, yes? What does it mean for those of us who read it? First, it means we're part of a larger story.

We're part of a larger story

Each of us has a story. Each of us is living a story. Writer Frederick Buechner picks up on this: "Writing novels, I got into the habit of looking for plots. After awhile, I began to suspect that my own life had a plot."¹ Yes, each of our lives, like a story, has a plot.

As with all good stories, our stories feature hard chapters: enemies, challenges, and obstacles. What will they do to us? Some of us withdraw from life and resign ourselves to boredom and fantasies, while others of us prevail by strength of will, even if we carry hidden scars. Many of us, whether we withdraw or whether we dominate, become buried in the details of our own story. If you're just focused on your own story, it can be suffocating.

Maybe what we really need is to connect with a story that's larger than ourselves. Starbucks thinks that's what we need, anyway. In the coffee company's latest effort to recruit workers, it makes this appeal: "Connect with something bigger, have an impact every day and work someplace truly great. The opportunity is here—all you have to do is take it." Starbucks is on to something: we want to connect with something bigger, something that gives our lives transcendence. With all due respect, the biblical story is bigger than Starbucks. Not in our wildest dreams or darkest nightmares could we have come up with a story like this.

Bring your story to the biblical story, the captivating Genesis-to-Revelation story of redemption, and let it draw you and your story up into it so that you become entwined with it, along with countless others who have been and are being drawn up into it. The story lifts us up and gives us perspective. The story is large enough that you can always find a chapter for your chapter and a character with whom to resonate. Moreover, because you're connected to a larger story, and because that story is redemptive, your story is heading in a good direction. Furthermore, because your story is connected to a larger story of redemption, it doesn't depend on you. You can breathe and move in this story.

First, we're part of a larger story. Second, we worship the author of the story.

Worship the author of the story

Every story has an author. Each of us is living a story, but none of us is writing the story. We didn't choose to be born, we didn't choose who we were born to, and we didn't choose where we were born. True, at certain points, as we age, we assert our wills, but our wills, strong as they are, cannot determine most of what happens to us. Strength of will never vanquishes the possibility of disaster, which can strike at any moment from any of a thousand directions. Worst of all (best of all?), strength of will cannot prevail over death.

To find the author of your story, look to the biblical story—and to its author. The biblical story says that its author, God, is also the author of your story. He chose to create you; he chose who you were born to; he chose where you were born. If it's a contest of wills, your will versus his will, who do you think will win?

Look what he's done. Look what he's doing. He's not only writing your story, he's also writing the larger story—and writing both in such a way so as to write you into the larger story. He does all this, and he does it this way—with unbearable tension, stunning plot twists, and breathtaking resolution—in order to do what great writers do: captivate us. Lift up your eyes: something powerful, beautiful, and mysterious is going on and we find ourselves right in the middle of it, on the edge of our seats, waiting to see what happens next.

The author of your story is God, who is also the author of the story of the world. In addition to all, we can meet the author! But it's not as if we have to wait in a long line at a bookstore only to have him sign our Bibles with a shrug and a smile before he's on to the next customer. If there's a signature at all, it's written in blood—the blood of his Son—telling us that he wants to take us home with him and spend all our days with him. The author of your story and the larger story of the world writes so as to captivate us. Yes, but to captivate us so as to draw us into a relationship with him. The appropriate response, the almost inevitable response, if we see things this way, is awe. The appropriate response is to worship the author of the story.

First, we're part of a larger story. Second, we worship the author of the story. Finally, the story is just beginning.

The story is just beginning

Filmmaker Woody Allen:

*There are some laughs you have in life, provided by comedians and provided by fortuitous moments with your family or friends or something. But most of life is tragic. You're born, you don't know why. You're here, you don't know why. You go, you die. Your family dies. Your friends die. People suffer. People live in constant terror. The world is full of poverty and corruption and war and Nazis and tsunamis. . . . The net result, the final count is, you lose—you don't beat the house. If you were lucky, if you were healthy and rich and everything worked out for you, you could laugh your whole life. But ultimately, what is it? It's less than a microsecond in the long run. . . . But even for the luckiest people, the really luckiest, luckiest—you know, you carve out a little oasis for yourself for a short period of time, but then, that's it.*²

He's right, of course—that is, unless the astonishing story of God and the world is true. If it is true, and we have every reason to believe that it is, then the story isn't over yet.

The last book in the canon, Revelation, looks forward to the new creation, where we, the servants of the Lord, “will reign forever and ever.” The story of the world up to this point, from the making of the world to the formation of the church, is indeed epic, but it isn't over yet. In fact, it won't even be over when the new creation arrives. In fact, when the new creation arrives, it will only mark the end of the beginning. Everything we see, everything that happens to us, and everything that happens to the world up until the new creation are just “the first things,” as John says. We've only just begun. When the new creation begins, the story begins anew.

Woody Allen is one of our greatest contemporary storytellers. Plus, he's a veritable quote machine. However, I prefer the worldview of a storyteller from a previous generation. C.S. Lewis is at his best with his last words in *The Last Battle*, his final entry in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He observes that the things that began to happen to his characters, after their incomparable adventure, were “too great and beautiful to write about.”

But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter

*One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*³

The end. Or, the beginning.

NOTES:

¹Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 93-94.

²Douglas J. Row, “Mining a Sense of the Tragic for Comedy” (Associated Press, appeared in *The San Jose Mercury News*, March 26, 2005), 3E.

³C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1956), 228.