

HIS STORY

Let me tell you a story about home. It's a true story that is changing lives and relationships in your home town and all around the world. It's the story of God and his intention to restore us all to home; a home of harmony, love, and joy. We find this story in the history of our race, recorded in the Bible. The Bible is not make-believe. It is an historical document verified by other historical writings and discoveries, given by God as his word to us, a word with the power to make us whole and the power to lead us home. Here is the briefest of summaries of his word:

Our story begins with God; for, in the beginning, before anything else, only he was there. He is the Most High God, the only one. From his enormously fertile imagination he created everything else. What fun he must have had! He spoke his intention and all things came into being, each at its own time. And when all was ready, he created life...angels of great power and beauty to serve and appreciate him; living animals, birds, reptiles, and insects; creatures of the water and the land. When all else was done, he created man...in his image. When he was done creating (is God ever done creating?), he examined all that he had made. You can imagine his pleasure as he said that it was all good and very beautiful.

Relationships are the most important thing in life, and God created man and woman to live in relationship with him. Their "image" was brightest and best when he was at their center. He created a fabulous garden for them to care for and live in and they lived at peace and in harmony with him and each other. And then he gave them the world to fill and to govern. He gave them one command; just one. All was theirs save for the fruit of one tree in that garden: The 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' He warned them that if they ate from that tree, they would die. They listened to him and lived with him in that setting of beauty. All was well and they were home.

Then a terrible thing happened. One of the angels - beautiful, powerful, and filled with pride - wanted to be like God and have the other angels follow him instead of God. But he was not God, and he was not the creator, and he was not worthy of worship. His pride lied to him. He rebelled against God and was cast out of heaven.

It was this fallen creature who entered the garden and used lies and temptation to move the woman to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. She listened to him and ate of the fruit, and then gave the fruit to the man so that he might eat of it as well. With a sudden explosion of clarity they knew that they had done wrong, and their relationship with God was damaged. This is the first record of sin. Sin is anything that separates us from God, and disobeying his commands is sin. Just as God had warned the man and the woman when he told them not to eat of the forbidden fruit, the consequence of sin was, and is, death. Completely righteous and holy, God cannot allow sin to go unpunished; because it fractures the perfect plan he created. And so the man and the woman were cast from their home with God, and their relationship with him was shattered.

As Adam & Eve's descendants, we find ourselves in their place. We too have sinned many times and in many ways. And sin has a terrible effect on our lives. We find that the things that separate us from God also separate us from each other, causing damage to our relationships and to our place in God's world. Separated from God and struggling to live in relationship with each other, we are far from home; hungry

for harmony, love, and joy, knowing that, as we are, we cannot live forever with God as we were designed to do.

Over time, the number of people on the earth multiplied. God loved them and desired them to have a relationship with him, but peoples and cultures had developed far from his design. So he gave a chosen group of people commandments and instructions to follow - markers to right living - like not worshipping other Gods or making idols to worship; honoring your parents; not lying, stealing, murdering, or committing adultery; and more. His plan was to display His character through this people, Israel, and through them to bless all the peoples & nations in the world. However, no one was able to successfully live by obeying all of the commandments.

So God gave them another way to be cleansed of their sin. Each time they sinned, God allowed them to make a blood sacrifice to take the place of their sin. This sacrifice was the shedding of the blood of a perfect animal, like a lamb. Remember the consequence of sin? Death. But if the people would repent and offer the blood sacrifice, God would forgive them and let the animal die in their place. Sin is so terrible, so damaging to God's created order and beauty of life, that only the shedding of blood can bring forgiveness.

But people kept sinning, and the sin sacrifice became a ritual rather than something from their heart. God wearied of their insincerity, and they were still separated from him. His commandments, given to show them the way to live and prosper, became their judge rather than their path to wholeness. He inspired & sent many messengers over hundreds of years, to call them back into relationship with Him. The combined history, laws, and writings of His messengers is now known as the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible; God's Word to mankind. But His chosen people remained separated from God, farther and farther from home. Today, we have also found this to be true; no matter how good our intentions, we cannot come back to God, no matter how hard we try. But God was able to use even our failure in His plan to bring us back into relationship with Him.

Through the centuries, God's love for people never faded, so he did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He used history, nations, and peoples to create the perfect way for us to reconnect with him. At just the right time, using just the right people, in just the right way...Jesus was given. Through him, God walked the earth again to show us the way back to himself. In Jesus, God calls us home.

Who was Jesus? The historical record tells us that he was a teacher of great depth and clarity, bringing light to the path of life as God intends it. The same record tells us he was a miracle worker. He demonstrated in many ways his mastery over the created order. He stopped a storm, he fed crowds from virtually nothing, he healed thousands, he restored deranged persons to their right minds, and he restored dead people to life. His power is greater than the powers of the world, or of evil. He is not only able to satisfy our needs, he is able to satisfy our deepest desire: Closeness to God and restoration to home.

Jesus was God in flesh, loving us and calling us all home.

However, remember sin? And its consequence...death? Sin is everything that separates us from God, the giver of life. It is in God's plan to deal with this core problem of sin, that we see the power and purpose of Jesus.

Jesus never sinned. He was so focused on doing what was right, that his life was completely wrapped-up in doing his father's will in all things. He was perfect. Because of his perfection, the father used Jesus to shatter the barriers between us and God...and each other.

Because of his sheer goodness and compassion, most people loved Jesus. But not the entrenched religious leaders. Because of their jealousy and political power they arrested Jesus, placed him on a large cross (two pieces of wood shaped in a large "T."), nailed him there through his hands and feet, and killed him. From his hands, feet, and body flowed his precious blood.

All this was part of God's plan; because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, able and willing to die for the sins of all mankind. We will never fully understand the mystery of this historical event: God in flesh, yet mortal man; the one who healed and raised others, yet died himself as a sacrifice; giver of life, embracing death. But we do know this from that historical record: That God chose to place all of the sin of all people from all times on Jesus as he died, so that all of that sin might be completely forgiven. He took our place!

And that should have been the end of it, right? No. The best was yet to come. After Jesus died he was placed in a secure tomb, sealed with a large stone. That was on a Friday. On the following Sunday, early in the morning, God raised Jesus from the dead! For 40 days, at various times, he appeared to his followers; preparing them for God's next act. But the enormous importance of what he had done was clear: He became our complete and final sacrifice. He shattered the power of sin, defeated death, and cast open the gates of heaven so that all who would might go home! Life, harmony, love, and joy triumphed! Multitudes of people were eyewitnesses of all these events, and a handful of His most trusted followers faithfully wrote books & letters about His ministry, teachings, and coming return. These writings are now known as the New Testament, the second part of the Bible; God's Word to mankind.

What God wants of us today isn't complicated. We are simply to follow Him. The Bible uses the word 'repent;' which means to leave our former way of living, and believe in God so thoroughly that we live for him...just him. Just before his death, Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." Follow him, that's what God wants us to do. Early in his teaching ministry Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in the God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death to life." But even that is not the end of the story.

We have God's promise that those who live in Him will transcend death; that we will then be clothed with new bodies of incredible beauty and power, and that we will live forever with God - the source of joy, love, and peace. Finally, we will be home. There, we will be part of a vast crowd; too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language. We will be gathered together with God, and heaven will resound with our roar of sheer joy...forever...

HIS STORY Discussion Questions:

Aside from whether you believe everything in 'His Story' or not...

- Is this picture of God consistent with what you have heard about the God of the Bible? How so, or how is it not?
- What are some aspects you strongly agree with?
- What are some aspects you strongly disagree with?
- If this were really true, how would it make you feel about the character and intentions of God?
- If this were really true, how would it make you feel about the nature and needs of people?
- What is 'Your Story'? How do you respond to this? How do you respond to Jesus?