



Research article

PREACHING THE GOSPEL AS A FOUR-ACT DRAMA

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Everyone has a basic story, and our lives are wrapped up in stories. Therefore, faith in Jesus should be how a Christian seeks to understand life, history, and their place in God's story. This is not just because the scriptural story is comprehensive, because it happens to be the story we have inherited, or because it is the story that works for us. We must take the story of God seriously because it is accurate and tells us the story of history truthfully, beginning with the creation and ending with the new creation.¹

Borrowing from the work of Craig G. Bartholomew & Michael W. Goheen in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, who suggest a six-act drama (Creation, Fall, Redemption Initiated, Redemption Accomplished, Mission of the Church, and Redemption Completed),² this work proposes a modified four-act drama (Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration). This four-act drama is fueled by and centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, found exclusively in the story of God. Because of this, the preacher should ask the question of every sermon, "Did the sermon show how the text testifies to Christ?"³ The purpose of doing so is to help preachers identify solutions for creating distinctly and decisively Christ-centered, Gospel-driven sermons.

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¹ Bartholomew and Goheen explain, "This is the way the world is, and Christians should make sure that the story of the Bible is basic in their lives. The Bible provides us with the basic story that we need in order to understand our world and to live in it as God's people. We know that it is one thing to confess the Bible to be the word of God, but often quite another thing to know how to read the Bible in a way that lets it influence the whole of our lives. There can easily be a gap between what we say we believe and how we live. If God has deliberately given us the Bible in the shape of a story, then only as we attend to it as story and actively appropriate it as our story will we feel the full impact of its authority and illumination in our lives." Bartholomew and Goheen, 20-22.

² Ibid., 27.

³ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 138.



Introduction

Stories are the language of our world. They draw us in...we begin to feel what the characters feel...their pain becomes our pain...their victory becomes our victory. We enter the drama, and it becomes part of our own experience. Stories are a powerful form of communication as they speak to the mind, the body, and the emotions.⁴ As we enter deeply into the story of the Bible, the Gospel is revealed to us. The idea that humans are hardwired for a four-fold story template is a concept that scholars have recognized for centuries. According to this template, a story typically includes a conflict, a quest for resolution, a crisis, and a resolution that leads to a new beginning. This storyline is often seen in movies, novels, and other forms of storytelling, and it is believed to produce a sense of satisfaction in the audience.

Interestingly, this story template is also present in the Bible, the ultimate story that hardwires us for every other story. Based on the Bible, Gospel preaching appeals to this built-in story template within us and reaches us cognitively and on a deeper level. By recognizing this story template, preachers can effectively engage with their audience and provide them with a sense of satisfaction beyond mere entertainment. This template taps into something deep within us that longs for a story that is more than just a temporary distraction but a story that provides us with a sense of purpose and meaning.

We will also find ourselves called to share in the mission of God and his purposes with the creation. After all, the Bible claims to be nothing less than God's true story of our world and calls us to appropriate this story for ourselves.⁵ The Bible is a unified book centered on Jesus Christ. The whole context—what we also call the canonical context—is

⁴ Caesar Kalinowski explains, "We live in a story, and a dominant story has shaped all of us. Is the story that most shapes your life and identity the story of God that is told throughout the Bible? Or is it a story from your culture, dysfunctional background, or a stack of lies that makes up the primary narrative of your life? What we believe about God and what he is like will ultimately determine our beliefs about ourselves and how life works. Part of gospel fluency comes from a clear understanding of the story of God and our ability to yet powerfully relate this story to circumstances in our lives and the lives of others. We learn to find our place and see how our lives intersect with God's big story. We can learn to tell God's story naturally and comfortably, like a servant, sharing a powerful story that changes lives." Caesar Kalinowski, *The Gospel Primer* (Littleton, CO: Missio Publishing, 2013), 26-27.

⁵ Bartholomew and Goheen, 22.



where we look ahead to discover the fullness of God's intent in light of the fullness of Scripture's message.⁶ In his work, *What is the Gospel?* Greg Gilbert explains,

"As Christians, we believe that God has spoken to us in his Word, the Bible. Furthermore, we believe that what God has said in the Bible is infallible and inerrantly true, leading us not to skepticism, despair, or uncertainty but to confidence. And so, it is to God's word that we look, to find what he has said to us about his Son, Jesus Christ, and the good news of the Gospel."⁷

Preaching the Gospel as a four-act drama helps preachers identify solutions for how to create sermons that are distinctly and decisively both Christ-centered and Gospel-driven.

The Gospel in Creation

Understanding the Gospel from Genesis and the creation account is imperative for preaching. How we view Genesis impacts our belief system. The first two chapters clearly insist that an omnipotent and omniscient Creator brought a "very good" universe into existence by His word (Gen. 1:31; 2 Peter 3:5), set Adam and Eve as stewards over that creation (Gen. 1:26; Psalm 8:5-8), and then passed judgment on that creation when Adam and Eve rebelled against the Creator's authority (Gen. 3:17-19; 1 Tim. 2:14). This historical framework helps us understand all of human history and our desperate need for Christ's redemption. The Gospel message depends on who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.⁸

In the New Testament, we find that John begins his account of the life of Jesus in a very profound way—from the Old Testament. Beginning in eternity past and echoing the very

⁶ Trent Hunter and Stephen Wellum, *Christ from the Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 26-27.

⁷ Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 26.

⁸ According to Henry M. Morris, "The world began when He (Jesus) created it (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-2). Through His work on the cross and subsequent burial and resurrection, the Lord Jesus opened the way through which fallen humanity can be redeemed (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). And His work will finally be consummated when He returns to claim His own and 'every knee [will] bow, of those in heaven, and those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). It is the responsibility of all twice-born to present the complete gospel message. If we neglect the creation, we negate God's omnipotence and nullify His omniscience. If we neglect the cross, we eliminate the sinless substitution of the only righteous man who can satisfy the holiness of God and administer the justice of the only One able to justify. If we neglect the consummation promised by the Creator who died in our stead on the cross, then there is no hope of eternal life in absolute righteousness." Henry M. Morris, *The Gospel Starts with Creation. Acts & Facts*. 47 (9). Accessed January 16, 2020, <https://www.icr.org/article/gospel-starts-with-creation>.



first words of the Bible, John identifies Jesus as the Word from Eternity, who has always existed with God the Father: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).⁹ We see this "Word" in action in Genesis 1 when we read, "And God said...."

That Word who made us, who created everything, is the same Word who came and purchased our salvation. Genesis, beginning with the first chapter, is the beginning of God's revelation of the person and work of the Son of God—our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we reject God's revelation about our Savior in Genesis 1, we have only part of a Savior—and only part of Christ is no Christ at all!¹⁰ From the viewpoint of the complete Gospel, that which was from "the beginning" is related directly to that which continued in the coming and work of Jesus Christ in time—and still continues.¹¹ In the sense and terms of the story of God, John 1:2 serves to declare that though the score of the prologue may be that of Genesis 1, the content is that of the Gospel.¹²

Genesis 1–2 speaks of God's creation of the cosmos, focusing on humanity. God created Adam and Eve, who are without sin, or, to put it more positively, are moral beings who are innocent. They are in a harmonious relationship with God and, thus, with each other. They live in a land of abundance and delight (Eden), lacking nothing. In a word, God "blessed" them (Gen. 1:22, 28), blessing being an essential word in the book of Genesis. Those blessed by God have a vibrant and healthy relationship with him, with each other, and

⁹ Hunter and Wellum explain, "This Word is none other than God the Son, the one through whom the Father created the world. The Son is the agent of creation, the maker of the world, its life, and light. The Son did not come into existence a long time ago; he has always existed in an eternal relationship, fellowship, and communion with the Father and the Spirit." Hunter and Wellum, 202.

¹⁰ Ian Taylor says, "But what happens to Christ's work of salvation if creation is not true? If evolution is true, death came into the world long before the first humans and their sins. If death is not a result of sin, why did Christ have to receive the penalty of sin – death on the cross? So, in challenging human origins, evolution challenges the origin of sin and its effect on humanity. And in challenging this, evolution challenges the very reason Christ came to earth! He becomes just a misguided being on the wrong planet! The Bible tells us that all Scripture was given to make us wise unto salvation. That includes Genesis. The first chapter of John's Gospel tells us that all things were created through the Word – the Word who became flesh." Ian Taylor, *Creation, and the Gospel*. Accessed January 16, 2020, <https://creationmoments.com/sermons/creation-and-the-gospel/>.

¹¹ Edward W. Klink III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 93.

¹² Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans, John Vriend. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 25.



with the world in which they live.¹³ Significantly, the creation story climaxes with God's rest on the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3), which is one crucial way to communicate God's goal for creation. "Rest" which refers to God's full enjoyment of his handiwork, is an easy theme to miss, but it is not unimportant. "Rest" gives us unique insights into the Bible's storyline and that of redemptive history.¹⁴

The Genesis account of creation highlights the importance of understanding the complete gospel message, which centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ from creation to restoration. The gospel message is not just about what Jesus accomplished on the cross but about who He is as Creator of all things, what He has done to secure redemption for fallen humanity, and that He is forever the Lord over everything. Neglecting any aspect of the gospel message undermines the integrity and authority of Scripture.

Scripture teaches that Jesus is the Creator of all things, and through Him, all things were made (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16). Therefore, the gospel message is not just about how Jesus saves us from sin, but it is also about how He created us and the world we live in. Neglecting the creation aspect of the gospel message denies God's omnipotence and omniscience and undermines the biblical worldview.

The gospel message includes the work of Jesus on the cross, His burial, and resurrection, which provide the only way for fallen humanity to be redeemed and reconciled to God (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Neglecting the cross means eliminating the sinless substitution of the only righteous man who can satisfy the holiness of God and administer the justice of the only One able to justify.

The gospel message further includes the consummation of all things promised by the Creator, who died in our stead on the cross. This promise gives us hope for eternal life in

¹³ Tremper Longman III explains, "When Creator God blessed Adam and Eve, they lived in a harmonious relationship with God and thus in a harmonious relationship with each other and their world. The name Eden, meaning 'abundance' or 'luxury,' also conveys a harmony between humanity and the world. Their rebellion against God fractured that harmony, and thus they forfeited a blessed existence. No longer was their relationship with God, each other, or even themselves harmonious." Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 14.

¹⁴ According to Hunter and Wellum, "The seventh day of rest is an important type and pattern that begins in the creation and is picked up in the Mosaic law in relation to the promised land and the Sabbath-day command (Josh. 21:43-45; Ex. 20:8-11; Ps. 95:11). More significant, God's creation rest ultimately points forward to Jesus, who by his work brings salvation rest and restores us to full relationship with our covenant God (Matt. 11:28-0; Heb. 3:7-4:11)." Hunter and Wellum, 82.



absolute righteousness, where every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). Therefore, all preachers must present the complete gospel message, including the creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, to a world needing salvation. If the creation account is accurate, we can trust the rest of Scripture and confidently proclaim that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

The Gospel in the Fall

Having established the Gospel in the creation account of Genesis 1-2, the story of God continues with the Fall of humanity. Genesis is a prequel to the main story of the Pentateuch (Exodus through Deuteronomy), giving the background to the events that led up to Israel's dramatic deliverance. Genesis begins with an account of the creation of the cosmos and humanity. Though created innocent, humanity chose to rebel against God and thus, as Paul says in Romans 5:12-21, introduced sin and death into the world.¹⁵ The Bible says that humanity was created good, but the human problem is rooted in history and directly related to the moral choice of the first man, Adam. Genesis 3 tells this story—a story necessary to make sense of the Bible's later salvation story and our lives today. Death is a problem for us. As it turns out, death is also our problem. It started with human sin.¹⁶

The world was made for God's glory, but his glory in creation was manifest in man and woman, bearers of his image, who were created to take dominion over creation and be the crown jewel of the material world. So, when sin entered them, it entered the world.¹⁷ One of Satan's tricks is to convince us that God is holding out on us and doesn't love and care for us. This unfortunate reality is recorded in Genesis 3 when Satan approaches Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and suggests that if God loved them, He would not keep anything from them and permit them to eat of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-7).

¹⁵ Longman III, 1.

¹⁶ Hunter and Wellum, 84.

¹⁷ Chandler explains, "Original sin has effects beyond humanity; it affects the world, the cosmos. 'The whole creation has been groaning' (Rom. 8:22). This is not just to remind us of the seriousness of rebellion against God but to indicate that human rebellion against God disrupts the natural order of everything. This is why a whole gospel must be explicitly about the restoration of God's image bearers and the restoration of the entire theatre of his glory, the entire cosmos." Chandler, 111.



The word "transgression" means rebellion against authority, in this case, God's authority. This is where it is helpful to see the holiness of God as speaking of His transcendent majesty, His supreme and authoritative rule. When we sin, we rebel against that authority (as Adam and Eve did). Sin is a willful rebellion against the supreme authority of the universe, a deliberate flouting of His moral law.¹⁸ All sin, then, is deserving of the severity of God, and no one is exempt from this.¹⁹ If we want to stay faithful to God when things are good and in the hard times of life (when we face trials and temptations as Adam and Eve did), we must explore three mistakes that Adam and Eve made. These three mistakes lead us to disobey God and miss out on a deeply fulfilling relationship with Jesus. By understanding these mistakes, we can set some boundaries to keep us from learning the hard way. First, not Believing God's Word (Genesis 3:1-4). Eve doubted and distorted what God had said. The serpent contradicts God's command and presents the fruit of the tree as something worth obtaining; by eating it, the couple will be like God, knowing good and evil. Adam and Eve make the mistake of believing the serpent and not believing God.

Second, Believing a False Word (Genesis 3:5). Adam and Eve, unfortunately, learn their lesson the hard way. By obeying the serpent, they betray the trust placed on them by God. Before this event, Adam and Eve only knew what was good, what God had provided for them. But because they disobeyed God, they experienced the reality of evil, sin, and separation from God.

Third, basing Decisions on Physical Desires (Genesis 3:6-7). The fruit seemed good and looked good momentarily. But then reality set in on what they had done. They had replaced God as ultimate with something temporal. The temporary satisfaction that the fruit brought didn't last, and they knew that their physical desire had cost them something far more substantial than they had ever thought.

Because God designed that Adam would represent the entire human race, his sin was catastrophic not only for him but also for us as "one trespass led to condemnation for all men" (Rom. 5:18). Our fellowship with God was broken. Instead of enjoying his holy pleasure, we instead face his righteous wrath. Through this sin, we all died spiritually (Rom.

¹⁸ Bridges, 33.

¹⁹ Chandler, 43.



3:1–20; Eph. 2:1–10), and the entire world was affected. God also cursed the world over which humanity had been set to reign as His steward lieutenants (Gen. 3:17–19). “The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it” (Rom. 8:20). And we all individually sin against God in our own lives “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

We need to understand that God's heart was broken because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, but he could not ignore what they had done. God always does what is good, right, and perfect, and His perfect justice requires that there be consequences for rebellion. So, God punished Adam and Eve by exiling them from the Garden. No longer following God's way, they were now subject to sickness, pain, toil, and death. God continued to love and care for Adam and Eve—he even created clothing for them out of animal skins so they would not be ashamed outside of the Garden.

However, Genesis 3 also teaches that there has been an enduring effect of the sin of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve experienced firsthand the fourfold effects of sin (Vertically, Horizontally, Internally, and Cosmically).²⁰ Because of that sin, we are all born morally fallen. We are naturally turned away from God and toward sin in every area of life. We are not as bad as we possibly could be, but we are at no point as good as we ought to be. We are all sinners (Rom. 3:23). We are corrupted and make the wrong choices. We are not holy and are inclined to evil; we do not love God and are therefore condemned to eternal ruin without defense or excuse. We are guilty of sinning against God, falling from His favor, under the curse of Genesis 3, and the promise of his right and just judgment of us in the future and forever is guaranteed to us “for the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23a). This is the state from which we need to be saved.

God's goodness is the great barrier against giving in to temptation. Since God is good, we don't need any other person, anything, or experience to meet our needs. The moment we start to doubt God's goodness, we will be attracted to Satan's offers; and our natural desires

²⁰ Hunter and Wellum explain, "Vertically, they experienced alienation and condemnation for God. Horizontally, they experienced alienation from each other. Internally (and schizophrenically), they experienced alienation within themselves. Cosmically, they experienced alienation in the world they were created to rule. These four effects of sin play out across the Bible's story but are immediately apparent from the moment sin enters the world." Hunter and Wellum, 87.



will reach out for the bait that the enemy puts in front of us. The challenge is to continually run to Jesus to be ultimate in our lives, as only Jesus can satisfy more than anything else. Even in the tragic tale of sin's entrance into the world, God does not give up his purposes for his creation and kingdom. Though Adam and Eve flee from him, God graciously takes the initiative to seek them out, offering the protoevangelium, the first Gospel.²¹

The Gospel in Redemption

The Old Testament clarifies that we humans rebelled against our Creator. We refused to trust his goodness and chose to disobey his command. The Old Testament shows how deep-rooted our sin is, affecting every part of our personality, every generation, and every culture. Only when we know how big the problem is (from the Old Testament) can we understand the size of God's solution through Christ in the New Testament.²² The Gospel is a true story based on events in history. It tells of a Creator-Redeemer who entered a broken, sinful world to rescue his creatures by becoming one of them.²³

The Old Testament proclaims God's mighty acts of redemption, which climax in the New Testament when God sends his Son. Redemptive history is the mighty river that runs from the old covenant to the new, holding the two together. It is true, of course, that there is a progression in redemptive history, but it is one redemptive history. There is indeed an old covenant and a new covenant, but it is one covenant of grace. The sacrifice of Christ indeed ended Old Testament worship with its blood sacrifices, however, Christians must still

²¹ According to Bartholomew and Goheen, "In declaring judgment, God curses the serpent and promises to put enmity between the serpent's offspring and that of the woman (Gen. 3:15). The woman's offspring will crush the serpent's head: God promises to extinguish the evil forces Adam and Eve have unleashed. This is the first biblical promise of the Gospel: Christ is to be 'the seed of the woman and will defeat Satan, though at great cost to himself, in the 'wounding' of his 'heel.'" Bartholomew and Goheen, 44.

²² Wright explains, "God promised to turn the curse into blessing. He would do it through the people of Abraham first. But then, through Israel, he would bless all nations on earth and ultimately restore the whole creation—a new heaven and earth (Isa. 65:17-25). That is the great saving plan of God for the world (the world of nations and the world of nature), which Christ accomplished in the New Testament. The New Testament gives us God's final answer, but the Old Testament tells us both the scale of the problem and the scale of God's promise. So, we will understand the Gospel in a far more full and comprehensive way when we see it first in the Old Testament." Wright, 22.

²³ Darrin Patrick states, "This Creator-Redeemer entered this world as a screaming, slimy baby in a dirty, smelly manger overwhelmed by the scent of hay and animal dung. In the greatest paradox of all history, God, a being of spirit, became a being in the flesh. Remaining a being of boundless power, he became weak and hungry and experienced pain. He went from God of heaven out there to be the Lord of the earth right here. God took the theory of his love for his people and wrapped it in skin and blood and gristle and bone." Darrin Patrick, *Church Planter: The Man, The Message, The Mission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 107.



sacrifice to the same God (Rom. 12:1). Progression in redemptive history occurs within the continuity of a single redemptive history.²⁴

In the Fall, we experience terrible news, the news that we have rebelled against God's law is not what we want to hear, but the truth often works like that. However, the Gospel ushers in the good news about Jesus. "But now," the Apostle Paul says, despite our sin, "now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21). In other words, there is a way for human beings to be counted righteous before God instead of unrighteous, to be declared innocent instead of guilty, to be justified instead of condemned. And it has nothing to do with acting better or living a more righteous life.²⁵ It is through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that sinners are set free and find redemption, and we respond by repenting of our sins and trusting our lives into Jesus' hands. That means recognizing our spiritual bankruptcy, acknowledging our complete inability to save ourselves, and coming to Jesus as our only hope of being forgiven and right before God.²⁶ Because of Jesus' finished work on the cross, all those whom God has called to be his can be forgiven and restored to a right relationship. As he hung on the cross at Calvary, Jesus bore all the horrible weight of the sin of God's people. All our rebellion, disobedience, and sin fell on his shoulders. And the curse God had pronounced in Eden—the sentence of death—struck.²⁷

²⁴ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 48.

²⁵ Gilbert explains, "Despite our rebellion against God, and in the face of a hopeless situation, we can be 'justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3:24). Through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection—because of his blood and his life—sinners may be saved from the condemnation our sins deserve. Paul tells his readers how they can be included in this salvation. That's what he writes about through the end of Romans chapter 3 and on into chapter 4. God's salvation comes 'through faith in Jesus Christ,' and it is 'for all who believe' (3:22). So how does this salvation become good news for me and not just for someone else? How do I come to be included in it? By believing in Jesus Christ. By trusting him and no other to save me." Gilbert, 30-31.

²⁶ Gilbert continues, "Becoming a Christian is not some laborious process. There's nothing to earn. Jesus has already earned everything you need. The Gospel calls you to turn your heart away from sin and toward Jesus in faith—that is, trust and reliance. It calls you to come to him and say, 'I know I can't save myself, Jesus, so I'm trusting you to do it for me.'" Ibid., 116.

²⁷ According to Gilbert, "This is why Jesus cried out in agony, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). God his Father, who is holy and righteous, whose eyes are too pure even to look on evil, looked at his Son, saw the sins of his Son's people resting on his shoulders, turned away in disgust, and poured out his wrath on his own Son. Matthew writes that darkness covered the land for about three hours while Jesus hung on the cross. That was the darkness of judgment, the weight of the Father's wrath falling on Jesus as he bore his people's sins and died in their place." Ibid., 67-68.



Thankfully, Jesus' death on the cross is not the end of the story. What Jesus accomplished was something that only the Son of God could accomplish. Jesus became our substitute, took our sins on himself, and was raised to life on the third day after paying for our sins. The cross could not keep him, yet he stayed on it for us. The grave could not stop him, as his finished work reveals. Jesus is alive and well. He rose from the grave, destroying any doubt about what the Scriptures said about him. When breath entered his resurrected lungs again, when resurrection life electrified his glorified body, everything Jesus claimed was entirely, finally, unquestionably, and irrevocably vindicated. Paul delights in Romans 8:33-34 over Jesus' resurrection and what the resurrection means for believers.²⁸ God's plan of salvation has been secured by the Son, who gave up his life to bring redemption to a broken people in a fractured world.

The Gospel in Restoration

God's plan has always been to have for himself a people (Gen. 17:7; Exo. 6:7; Ezek. 34:24, 36:28; Jer. 7:23, 30:22, 31:33), a Gospel-driven community made up of Gospel-driven people who are passionate and on mission to share the good news of God's work. The church is an embassy—the colony of heaven—to which the victims of Satan's tyrannical reign flee to escape this present evil age. There is no other name of any other king upon whom we may call to deliver us from our most dangerous foes but this one who has descended and ascended and will come again for his own.²⁹ When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground because of him (Gen. 3:17-19), creating a need to restore all things God had made. This curse affected not only Adam and Eve but the entire created order. But, in Romans 8:21, the Apostle Paul promises a full and final restoration that God will bring, changing death and decay into glorious life and liberty. Paul explains that this will happen when we receive our resurrection bodies; he says that the creation somehow longs for that day "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... We know that the whole creation has

²⁸ Ibid., 69-70.

²⁹ According to Michael Horton, "Before it is called to do anything, the church is called to receive something—and not only once, but again and again: namely, the announcement that even in its weakness, suffering, half-heartedness, and a legacy of faith stained by unfaithfulness, Christ is king. Only because all authority has been entrusted to him is the church authorized to go into all the world with the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord and the confidence that the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 190.



been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:19, 22-23).³⁰ According to Michael Horton, "God's eternal Son is present at the beginning of the story of creation (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20), He was the Rock struck for Israel's sins (1 Cor. 10:4), and in the Bible's closing book He is God's last Word, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades' (Rev. 1:17-18)."³¹

Christians often talk about living with God "in heaven" forever. But the biblical teaching is richer than that: it tells us that there will be a new heaven and earth—an entirely renewed creation—and we will live with God there.³² The Gospel is the consummation of the story of God, found in the re-birth or re-creation of the old, fallen humanity and world. What is impressive about Revelation 21 and 22 is how seemingly every strand of Scripture is drawn together and brought to its perfect conclusion.³³ The story of God begins and culminates in and through Christ's redemptive work, seen in the creation of heaven and earth. The first two chapters in Genesis give us the creation of the first heavens and earth, while the final two chapters of Revelation illuminate the final creation of a new heaven and earth. Returning to

³⁰ According to Wayne Grudem, "In this renewed creation, there will be no more thorns or thistles, no more floods or droughts, no more deserts or uninhabitable jungles, no more earthquakes or tornadoes, no more poisonous snakes or bees that sting or mushrooms that kill. There will be a fertile earth that will blossom and produce food abundantly for our enjoyment." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 835-836.

³¹ Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World*, 95.

³² Grudem continues, "The Lord promises through Isaiah, 'For behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered' (Isa. 65:17), and speaks of 'the new heavens and the new earth which I will make' (Isa. 66:22). Peter says, 'according to his promise we wait for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:13). In John's vision of events to follow the final judgment, he says, 'The I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away' (Rev. 21:1). He goes on to tell us that there will also be a new kind of unification of heaven and earth, for he sees the holy city, the 'new Jerusalem,' coming 'down out of heaven from God' (Rev. 21:2), and hears a voice proclaiming that 'the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them' (v.3). So, there will be a joining of heaven and earth in this new creation, and there we will live in the presence of God." Grudem, 1158.

³³ Philip Graham Ryken explains, "The Book of Revelation contains roughly five hundred allusions to or quotations from the Old Testament. In the last two chapters, every major theme from Scripture reappears. Covenant, atonement, temple, and kingdom are all here. Of course, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are here. Jesus Christ is here in his prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices. We see heaven and earth, sin and salvation, creation, and consummation. It is all here in these last two chapters. Philip Graham Ryken. "A New Heaven and A New Earth" in *Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven & New Earth*, edited by D.A. Carson and Jeff Robinson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 121.



our old homeland is in keeping with our human nature and the character of God, who always finishes what he starts. He is “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 21:6).³⁴

The curse that Adam and Eve brought about in Genesis is now fully defeated through the person and work of Jesus Christ. When Christ returns, the curse will be reversed. We no longer live in paradise; our address is east of Eden. Humanity has fallen into sin and therefore has come under judgment. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden when they ate the forbidden fruit. This was partly an act of grace, as God was waiting for the second Adam to bring salvation, but it is an exile, nonetheless. Our great sin has brought endless woe to the human race: guilt, alienation, slavery, warfare, and abuse.³⁵ As the Godman, Jesus Christ has authority over life and death. By the power of his resurrection, he will never die again. And by that same power, he will raise every one of his followers to eternal life. The Gospel culminates in this truth that the person and work of Jesus Christ is completely adequate to restore all things. Jesus was the first to rise. His plan is for all his children to rise and never die again. No more death! The death of Christ is the death of death, and his resurrection is the birth of eternal life.³⁶

Conclusion

All believers presently struggle with temptation and sin, but the temporary power of sin cannot keep us from an eternity with Christ. It cannot take away the truth that one day Jesus will return and bring all his children into a final state of freedom and sinless perfection. A significant change will take place—a total reversal. The curse will be reversed.³⁷ Due to Jesus'

³⁴ Ryken continues, "What other God could work such a perfect plan—bringing the Bible to such a fitting conclusion and the plan of salvation to such a magnificent culmination—except the God who has been there since before time began and who sees the end from the beginning? Because God was always there, we find our end in our beginning and our beginning in our end." *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁵ Ryken states, "But when we peek at the last pages of the Bible, we see how the story will end. The dreadful consequences of sin in a fallen world will be overcome; the curse will be reversed. Thus, Revelation 21 and 22 are full of images from Scripture of things that have been damaged and all but destroyed by sin, but one day will be restored." *Ibid.*, 124-125.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁷ Ryken further explains, "God's plan is not simply to take us back somewhere. He does not intend to unwind or rewind something. He wants to carry things forward to absolute perfection. God will bring everything to the perfect conclusion he always intended—something far above and beyond anything we've ever seen. The promise is not just being taken away from earth and heaven; it's a new earth and heaven. God will not simply take us out of this world into another world, but he will make this world new." *Ibid.*, 132-133



finished work on the cross, all believers are filled with the Gospel hope that salvation has been accomplished and that believers now stand positionally justified in right relationship with God. The key to preaching the Gospel in Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration should always focus on Jesus Christ. As Philip Graham Ryken puts it, "when salvation is consummated, then creation will be recapitulated, and the curse reversed. But at the center of it all will be the person of Jesus Christ, whose presence will make heaven be heaven."³⁸ The Gospel is not just something that has been done for us; it is the something that continues to forgive, challenge, change, and transform us. The Gospel will be the something that continues to sustain us for all of Eternity. The new heaven and earth will be everything that Revelation promises and infinitely more—forever. The sufferings of persecution, sin, pain, and loss will last only a little while, but the triumph of our reign with Christ will last forever.³⁹

The four-fold movement of conflict, quest, crisis, and resolution is a typical pattern in storytelling and has been recognized since ancient times. This pattern taps into our innate desire for resolution and closure and resonates with us deeply. The Bible, like many great stories, follows this pattern as well. There is a conflict between God and humanity, a quest for redemption and salvation. During this crisis, redemption may not seem possible, but a resolution through Jesus Christ ultimately leads to a new beginning. This storyline is in the Bible and can be found in many other stories throughout history. It is a universal pattern that speaks to our shared human experience.

When preaching the Gospel, it is helpful to tap into this story template to help people connect with the message on a deeper level. By framing the Gospel message following this pattern, it can be more relatable and impactful to the listener. However, it is essential to

³⁸ Ibid., 134.

³⁹ Ryken concludes, "Eternity is essential to the blessedness of the new heaven and the new earth. They could not captivate us with their blessing if they did not last forever. But the repeated promise of Revelation is that all of these things will be ours forever. The people of God in glory will not know this bitter feeling because when we get to heaven, the blessings of God will be ours forever and ever, uninterrupted for all of Eternity. The Scripture says that 'the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever' (1 John 2:17). The new heaven and the new earth will be the last heaven and the last earth. They will remain in the brightness of their glory forever. This is why they are described in terms of gold and jewels—precious things from the earth that point to the permanence of heaven. The brightness of that glory will be the radiant splendor of God himself. Since his glory will never fade, our glory will never be diminished. It truly will be an eternal glory—glory in absolute perfection extended out into Eternity—a forever of 'forevers'—a joy that will never end." Ibid., 136-137.



remember that the gospel message is more than just A STORY; it is THE STORY, THE MESSAGE of hope and salvation, that transforms lives.

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