

# INTRODUCTION

finding your story  
in God's story

**REDEEMER CITY CHURCH**



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1. So where do we begin? (Creation)	6
2. So what went wrong? (The Fall)	18
3. So where can we turn? (Redemption)	28
4. So what happens next? (Restoration)	38

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Introduction! Introduction is a conversational place where you can explore faith and experience community. We hope you will find this to be a safe environment to ask any questions you have about faith.

In preparation for each group meeting, you will work through a chapter of this Conversation Guide, reading a passage of the Bible and answering a few questions along the way. The group experience will be based on these elements. Therefore, it is important to complete them each week before your group meeting. In preparation for your first group meeting, please read and complete the questions for Chapter One.

When your group meets, discussion and dialogue will be a priority. Your leaders will not teach or lecture, but will facilitate conversation and seek input from all members. Plan to ask good questions and share what you are learning. Be respectful to others in the group. Listen when they speak and be affirming whenever you can. Above all, trust that God has led you here for a reason...to find your place in *the* story.

Welcome to Introduction...

# 1.

## SO WHERE DO WE BEGIN? (CREATION)

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**W**e have called this study Introduction because it is a way for you to be introduced to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. But, we have also called this Introduction because this curriculum is framed in the context of a story or novel with chapters, just like the chapters of a story. And your life is a story. Have you ever considered that? Your life is a story that began before you even drew your first breath. It began at your conception, and the plot has been building ever since. As each chapter and scene unfolds, it reveals the meaning of the overall storyline.

Like any story, there are moments of clarity and moments of uncertainty. From time to time, you may find yourself struggling to remember where you were headed and why. There are even occasions when you feel like you've lost your place in your own story. The pieces can seem fragmented. You know it's supposed to make sense somehow, but the chapters don't quite fit together.

Something's missing. Have you ever been at a place in your story like that? Are you there right now?

# **"YOUR LIFE IS A STORY THAT BEGAN BEFORE YOU EVEN BEGAN YOUR FIRST BREATH."**

Either way, everybody has a beginning. A *creation story*. Where did it all begin for you? Were you raised with some sort of belief in God and a sense of your own spiritual destiny? Was God a vague concept that only came up on a few rare occasions? Or was God never mentioned at all in your childhood home? No doubt you know the experience of lying in bed and wondering what life is all about. Depending on your upbringing, God has either been a big or small part of your worldview. Whatever the case may be, this moment is an important milestone as you set out to explore your story in the midst of *the story*, the gospel narrative.



## The Story Behind the Story

Have you ever tried to jump into a movie or a television series halfway through the story? It can be very confusing. It can be frustrating. It can be hard to understand. This is what it's like trying to understand our story without understanding *the story*. Since each of us is living in the midst of a larger story, it can be hard to understand where we are in the story because we find ourselves in medias res. We have begun in the middle.

Enter the Bible. Have you ever considered that the existence of the Bible may be one of God's greatest works? There are 66 books in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation that are divided into two large sections known as the Old Testament and the New Testament. There are several different genres, or styles, of writing contained within the Bible and it's important to understand which genre is used in each book. Furthermore, these 66 books of the Bible, with all of their different genres, were written by 40 different human authors, most of whom never met each other. *And*, the Bible was written over the course of nearly 1,500 years. Yet, with all of that, the Bible tells one coherent story! Is that amazing or what?!

We call this story the gospel narrative: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. But most importantly, the Bible is the grand story of God and his purposes for the people he created. And that's why it's impossible to understand your story without understanding *the story*. Trying to understand your story without understanding the story is like trying to jump into the middle of a novel, a movie, or a television series halfway through the story. It's confusing, It can be frustrating.

Each week, we will examine the Bible, a source of spiritual authority for people all over the world. You will read a particular passage of Scripture in preparation for each group meeting. Our conversation will focus on what we can learn from the passage and how it applies to our lives. So before we dive in, let's get acquainted with this ancient book.

## **The Story's Script**

Our introduction begins with a question: If God wanted to reveal himself to humanity, how would he do it? Would he tell us his "story"? Would paint a glorious picture in creation for all to see? Or maybe he would put instincts in the human heart that point to his character. But perhaps more specifically, he might even provide a script that lays out the grand story of his reality and our purpose. And according to the Christian faith, the script that God has laid out is written on the pages of the Bible.

## **Why should I trust the Bible?**

That is a really good question. Some people are concerned that the Bible contains apparent contradictions and inconsistencies. And many point to the fact that, as we said earlier, the Bible is written by human authors. Why should we trust it?

On one hand, the Bible possesses a significant amount of verifiable evidences to support its claims. Many portions of the Old Testament have been validated by archaeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls reveal the precision with which scribes copied and distributed Scripture. Furthermore, the accounts of the

New Testament, including the life of Jesus, known as the gospels, are also extremely substantiated. Did you know that most literary scholars, whether Christian or not, would attest to the validity of the Scriptures? The way that literary scholars make these assessments are based on the date of the earliest known manuscripts, the number of copies found, and the extent of the distribution of those copies. Based on that scientific assessment, according to literary scholars, there is no literary work more credible than the Scriptures in the Bible. Not even the history books we read in high school and college have better literary credibility! Yet, we believe what we read it them.

Nevertheless, some suggest that various passages of Scripture contradict one another, but scholars point out that a better grasp of the themes, language, culture, and original writings usually reveals that these so-called “contradictions” are only differences in emphasis. In fact, many point to the presence of apparent conflicts as evidence of authenticity because the variations are exactly what you would expect when two different people tell the same story.

*But, isn't it written by human authors?*

On one hand, the answer to that question is: Yes. But, on the other, the answer is: No. Here is what 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” What this says, is that all scripture is actually written by God himself through human authors. We often say the writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. This

may leave you scratching your head. But, here is a potentially helpful way to think of it...

Imagine each human author of the books of the Bible as a brass or woodwind instrument in an orchestra. You could have a trumpet, a trombone, a clarinet, and a tuba. They have different shapes, different sizes, and most importantly, different personalities and sounds. Therefore, when someone blows or breathes into the instrument, they play the same notes, they tell a unified story, but they all make a slightly different sound. This is what it means for all scripture to be breathed out by God. Each human author is an instrument in the hand of God. God breathes into the instruments, and they all play the same notes and tell the same story. They just sound slightly different because they have different personalities. God is like a master composer. He tells his beautiful story through his chosen instruments, while allowing them to maintain their unique personalities. Is that a cool picture or what? We can trust the Bible because of its literary credibility and because it is breathed out by God.



# The Creation of the Story

## *The Big Picture*

Like we said earlier, it's hard to understand *the story* if we jump into the middle. And, it's hard to understand *our story* if we don't understand *the story*. So let's take a look at the big picture.

At some point in time, we all come to a moment when the questions start to fill our heads. How in the world did this all begin? What is the purpose of all of this? There's got to be something bigger out there, isn't there? What is my purpose? Whether it is the birth of a child, the loss of a loved one, the beginning of a new phase of life, a glimpse into the workings of our bodies, or a glance up at the stars, at some point in time, we all wrestle with these questions.

Deep inside, something tells us that there is something bigger going on in the universe. Is it really possible for each of us to be a random set of molecules that come together, live for 70 or 80 years, and then die off? Is that really all there is to this? The scriptures say that even the natural world around us points to the fact that there is a Creator...a big God (Romans 1:20). And within his big purpose for his creation, we experience and learn our greatest sense of purpose when we find our place in the story...his big story.

Scripture begins with the story of creation in the book of Genesis. Oftentimes, this ancient narrative raises just about as many questions as answers. Some wonder how the story of creation fits with some scientific theories of our day. But, let's not miss the big picture of how this account takes shape. The story begins with one God who speaks

everything into existence, he creates human beings to bear his glorious image, to be his image bearers in the world, to display his character across his creation. As you read through this account, don't overlook the rich imagery and poetic rhythm. Marvel at what this says about God...and us. Enjoy this picture of the world as it was meant to be.

Read Genesis 1:1 through 2:3 in your Bible and respond to the following questions:

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. Do you find it hard to accept the story of creation? Why or why not?

2. What does this account reveal about God?

3. How does the creation of humankind differ from the rest of the account?

4. What questions do you have about the creation account?

5. What has reading and discussing this creation account meant to you?

## Storyline of Chapter One

- We all have a story, and it's hard to understand our story without understanding *the story*.
- God reveals himself and *the story* to us today through scripture.
- The Bible is both historically reliable and relevant to our lives.
- The story begins with a glorious Creator and his beautiful creation.
- Human beings were created to reflect God's image and be in relationship with him.

## For the Next Group Meeting

- Read Chapter Two of our storyline and complete the questions.
- At our next group meeting, we will discuss what went wrong with God's good creation, and unfortunately, what continues to go wrong. This week, as you watch the news, read articles, or surf the internet, pay attention to the terrible headlines. Choose one story that underscores the reality of the brokenness of this world. Bring it with you and be ready to share.

# 2

## SO WHAT WENT WRONG? (THE FALL)

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**C**an we just go ahead and admit that this world is a messed-up place? We don't need to be negative and take a pessimistic view point all the time. But, we do need to admit that, in many ways, this world is messed up. Brokenness is prevalent everywhere we look, isn't it? We live in a world full of crime, pollution, warfare, hatred, disease, famine, poverty, and violence. On top of that, the world itself causes disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. This is the scenery in which our life, our story, plays out.

This reality is often what leads people to choose to deny the presence of a God who is in control of everything. The argument typically goes like this: "How could a loving God allow such brokenness and hardship in the world?" We look around, and we know that when a child dies it is not good. We know that when someone commits an offense against us it is not right. We all have a concept of good and bad, right and wrong. We all have a desire for justice. We

all want wrongs to be righted. And we look around, and we know things just aren't right.

So how does all of this jive with what we discussed in chapter one? If a perfect God created an ideal world, why is it so messed up? What in the world went wrong? Surely a supreme and loving God would not author a story so messed up, so full of brokenness.

**"... WE NEED TO  
CONSIDER THAT PERHAPS  
EACH OF US IS PART OF  
THE PROBLEM."**

But, when you think about it, what is at the root of the brokenness in this world? Is it jealousy, pride, anger, arrogance, and selfishness? If we could stamp out all of these things, would the world not be so broken? Now, before we get too impassioned about fighting all of these wrongs in the world, we need to consider that perhaps each of us is part of the problem. If we're honest, isn't it true that all of us exhibit at least some of the character traits listed above? Somehow, it's in our nature to be jealous, prideful, angry, arrogant, and selfish. Could it be that each of us has a role to play in the brokenness we see? This is a sad story indeed.



## **The Story Behind the Story**

So, really, what in the world went wrong? If God is a good and perfect Creator? And, if God created a perfect world for people to live in and everything was good, then what went wrong? For that, we need to go back to the bigger story...

As we saw, life in the garden was good for Adam and Eve. God looked and saw that everything was good. The environment was perfectly suited for Adam and Eve. They lived in perfect harmony with the animals. They lived in perfect harmony with one another. And, most importantly, they lived in perfect harmony with God. God had blessed his creation beyond measure.

As the Creator and provider of this great blessing, God set out a few guidelines for his people to live by. First, they should be fruitful and multiply. No problem. Second, they were to rule and subdue the earth as good stewards who oversee and care for God's creation. Again, humans are created to bear God's image and display his characteristics in the world. And third, they could eat from any tree but one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they ate of it, it would bring the terrible consequence of death.

This is where the story takes a horrific turn for the worse. The following passage describes what is known as the fall of humanity into sin, which forever connects us to our first parents—both in their destructive choice and the ensuing brokenness.

Read Genesis 3:1-24 in your Bible and respond to the following questions.



## The Tension Behind the Story

Let's be honest, as you read that passage, are you tempted to think, "What was the big deal? So, they ate a piece of fruit. Why is there so much consequence?" Perhaps you're not even sure if you believe in something called sin anyway. But, in order to understand *the story*, and therefore, our story, we need to understand sin and why it is such a big deal...

Sin is a relatively universal concept that is recognized in many cultures around the world. Everybody knows what it's like to lie about something or someone, to take anger to the extreme, or to lust after something that is not ours. Sin, whether you like the word or not, has become such a part of our world, that we've really become numb to it. We really can't imagine a world without it. Because of this, we often wonder what the big deal is.

As we said in chapter one, human beings were created by God, in the image of God, in order to live under his good authority and display his characteristics in the world around us. From this, we get our working definition of sin: Sin is anything that seeks to undermine God's authority and misrepresent his characteristics in the world. And let's face it, if that is our definition, then none of us is immune to sin. As one biblical author writes: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

Therefore, God takes sin very seriously because of the statement it makes about our understanding of him and our care for those created in his image. Ultimately, God is supreme. We are not. God is the ultimate authority. We are not. And we choose either submission to his good

authority or rebellion against him. Remember, anything we do that seeks to undermine his authority or misrepresent his characteristics is sinful. One small sin may not seem like a big deal. But, underneath it all, the nature of sin begs the question of whether we acknowledge God or not. And that is a big deal. He is *the* Creator. He is *our* Creator. *He* is worthy of our recognition.

You see, declaring one tree in the garden to be “off limits” may seem arbitrary. But, when Adam and Eve chose to disobey, they declared that they wanted to be like God rather than simply trust him and his good authority. And when we sin today, we reiterate that choice by staging our own one-person mutiny against our Creator God. And like Adam and Eve, the brokenness that ensues reverberates throughout our lives and the lives of those around us.

Ultimately, the Bible says that sin results in death. The apostle Paul writes that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Sin causes death in our physical bodies and death in our relationship with God. Now, we may be tempted to think that death is quite a price to pay for sin. But, in some ways, you should be glad for it. As we said earlier, we all have an innate sense of right and wrong, and we desire justice in the world. Well, though we may not like it, the fact that the wages of sin is death actually shows us that God is a God of justice. The ultimate wrong, sin, is met with the ultimate justice, death.



4. How do you respond to the statement that God's dealing with sin actually displays that he is just?

5. Are you willing to accept that there is sin in the world and, more importantly, in you?

## Storyline of Chapter Two

- The world is broken because humanity chose to defy God by satisfying our selfish desires.
- The result of our sinful nature is death—both physical death and death in our relationship with God.

## For the Next Group Meeting

- Read Chapter Three of our storyline and complete the questions.
- At the next group meeting, we will discuss how God responds to a broken relationship with humanity. All of us, from time to time, have experienced alienation from people who are important to us. What would it take to reestablish one of these relationships? Do you have someone from whom you're disconnected? Would you consider taking the first step to initiate reconciliation? This week, be bold and make the first move to pursue reconciliation. Be prepared to share with the group the outcome as well as your emotions during the process.
- In light of what we discussed in this chapter, spend some time alone thinking about the way sin manifests itself through your thoughts and actions. Using a pen and paper, write down your most selfish ways, habits, thoughts, and behaviors. It can be in the form of a confessional prayer to God or a simple list. Fold it up and put it in a sealed envelope. Be honest because no one else will see or read what you write. Are you willing to admit that you have sinful thoughts and actions? Bring your list in its envelope to the next group meeting.

# 3

## SO WHERE CAN WE TURN? (REDEMPTION)

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**S**o, if all of us really are sinners, where can we turn? All of us, stuck looking only at our own story, consistently seek to find ways to earn our way out of our sin debt. We may not see it that way, but that is what we are doing—we are trying to find a righteousness, a right standing, or a validation in this world based upon our behaviors and our actions. It's why some of us strive for achievement, approval, success, wealth, etc. The hope is that in gaining those things, we will gain validation and be declared worthy by the world around us. It's why some of us strive to follow the rules, fall in line, and appease everyone around them. The hope is that in doing that, we will gain the approval of those around us and feel valued. And it's why some of us, driven to despair by all the pressure to perform, turn to alcohol, drugs, and sex in order to find comfort and relief from it all.

But, if we're honest, none of those things really work, do they? The line of success keeps moving with every

achievement. Full approval from finicky people can never truly be gained. And our vices often lead to grief and despair, not comfort and mercy. Not to mention, that as we stated last week, our biggest problem is that we have a record of sin against a holy God that needs to be cleared and forgiven. And in a strange twist of irony, it is often our desire to earn our own righteousness that keeps us from accepting and receiving the forgiveness we so desperately need from God.

Think about it. Think about some popular sayings that we have. "What goes around comes around." "You'll get yours someday." "It all evens out in the end." Everything within us, everyone around us, and likely even our parents and teachers have indoctrinated us into this notion that in order to gain acceptance, validation, approval, or forgiveness, we must earn it. We know instinctively that scales must be balanced, that debts must be paid; without it there is no justice.

But, if we have experientially learned that our quests to validate ourselves often end in despair. And if, as we saw last week, it is our sin that is actually the greatest problem we face, where can we turn? We can't possibly be the answer to the problem we caused. Is there something or someone we can turn to, to find validation, approval, acceptance, and forgiveness?



## **The Story Behind the Story**

As we said earlier, if our sin is actually the biggest problem we face and if we really can't be the answer to the problem we cause, then is there something or someone we can turn to, to find validation, approval, acceptance, and forgiveness? For that, we need to jump back into *the* story.

After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, and the world and mankind suffered the consequences, God got to work on a redemption plan. From a man named Abram, who would later be called Abraham, God formed a family that would eventually become the nation of Israel. But, as this nation grew, they found themselves enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. Then, God told the Israelites to sacrifice a spotless lamb and put the blood on their doorposts because he was about to send a plague throughout Egypt. But, anyone who had the blood of the lamb on their doorposts would be saved. The Israelites followed God's word and were saved and set free from bondage.

Upon freeing his people, God commanded the Israelites to remember this miracle by instituting what is known as the Passover. It would be a remembrance of both how God saved his people by covering them with the blood of a sacrifice and how forgiveness of sins would come through the shedding of blood. On top of that, the Israelites were told that one day they would have a king, a savior, a Messiah, who would free them from oppression once and for all.

But for centuries and centuries and centuries, Israel suffered through failed king after failed king, and they wondered if God would be true to his word. Then one day,

a new Rabbi appeared, teaching with powerful authority. His name was Jesus. And he spent time with the poor and downcast, even prostitutes and nobodies. Stories of miraculous healings began to surface, and people—even non-Jews—began to seek him. People began to believe that this Jesus might be the long-awaited Messiah.

## **"HE (JESUS) WOULD BE THE FINAL PAYMENT FOR OUR SIN."**

Religious leaders began to worry. They couldn't believe that a man could come and speak on behalf of God. Jesus announced the arrival of a new era and the coming of God's kingdom, where the poor, the downcast, the marginalized, and the weak, as well as the religious, the officials, and the rulers could find validation, approval, and a new identity. Most importantly, Jesus taught that people would receive forgiveness of sins through his death and the shedding of his blood. He would be our Passover lamb. He would be the final payment for our sin. He would be the One we could turn to for validation, approval, acceptance, and forgiveness. What took place next defines not only Jesus' life, but the story of God's grace and humanity's redemption.

Read Matthew 27:11-28:20 and Romans 3:21-26, and respond to the following questions.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. In the narrative of Matthew 27 and 28, what was unique about what Jesus said or did? What he did not say or do?
2. In Romans 3:26, what do you think it means that God did this so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus?
3. What does Jesus' death mean to you personally?
4. Do you think Jesus' resurrection is important to the story? Why or why not?

## **The Tension Behind the Story**

Is Christianity really the only way to God? Don't all religions lead to God?

Many will want to say that there is no difference between religions and that all roads eventually lead to God. If we all have different backgrounds and we all have different stories, can't we all get to God in our own way? If we all have slightly different ways of approaching our particular god, is that so wrong?

In reality, the differences between Christianity and other religions far outnumber the similarities. Judaism bears the closest resemblance, right down to the promise of a Messiah who would restore people to God and reverse the curse of brokenness in our world. But, when Jesus came as the Messiah, he was rejected by the leaders of that religion.

What Jesus did and taught also separates Christianity from all other religions. He asserted: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Thus, God's plan for humanity, which began with a promise to Abraham, reached its climax in the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus was not only the Messiah of Israel, but the Son of God and the Savior of the world. This is why his early followers asserted: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). While many other religions contain positive teachings and enlightening insights, only Jesus offers forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. Therefore, dismissing him is to decline the very grace God has extended.

Ironically, many still attempt to earn God's favor through the same efforts at performance that resulted in our failure with God to begin with. Thus, other religions have been defined as humanity's effort to get right with God.

Whereas, Christianity has been described as humanity's reliance on God's effort—namely, the work of Christ. There is a famous passage that describes the nature of God's grace: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

These verses give a detailed explanation of the purpose behind Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The motive was that God loved the world. The highlight is that God gave his Son. The response is that we believe in him. And the result is that we receive eternal life.

In summary: God loved. God gave. We believe. We receive.



## Storyline of Chapter Three

- Our rebellion warrants full condemnation, but in his grace, God offers to pay the penalty for us.
- When we express faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, our relationship with God is restored.

## For the Next Group Meeting

- Read Chapter Four in our storyline and complete the questions.
- Next week, we will continue exploring what it means to have a relationship with God. Specifically, one thing we will discuss is God's presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Before the next group meeting, take 30 minutes during at least one day to be alone with God. Choose a passage of scripture to read, pray before reading it, and ask God to reveal himself and speak to you. Read the passage and then sit in silence, meditating on God's Word, giving your attention to God, listening for his guidance, and offering up your worries to him. Ask his Spirit to guide your thoughts. Plan to share your experience with the group.

# 4

## SO WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? (RESTORATION)

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**A**s we saw toward the end of our last chapter, in Matthew 28, Jesus said that as we placed our faith and trust in him and taught others to do the same, he would be with us always until the end of the age. But how can we have meaningful interaction and relationship with a God we can neither see nor touch?

I'm sure that's how the disciples felt when they saw Jesus ascend into heaven after his resurrection. What do we do now? How are we to live in light of all that we have experienced? How are we supposed to fulfill the mission he gave us? Well, what Jesus said to them also applies to us. Jesus told them that he would send the Holy Spirit of God, and that the Holy Spirit would guide those who have placed their faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is described as a helper, a counselor, and a guide. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would remind us of all that Jesus taught and that he would lead us in all truth. Despite the fact that Jesus was gone, the disciples managed to experience intimacy and

relationship with God when they listened and followed the promptings of the still, small voice of the helper, the counselor, the Holy Spirit.

And interestingly enough, it's probably not too different from the subtle promptings that led you to seek him and find yourself in this group. Think about everything that has taken place for you to find yourself in this place right now. Have you ever considered that that is the work of God through his Holy Spirit in your life? Perhaps six months ago or three months ago or one month ago, you would have never imagined yourself being here, and yet, here you are. That is the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus promises that when we place our faith and our trust in him, the Holy Spirit will dwell within us and continue to guide us wherever we go. He will remind us of the truth in scripture. He will bring to mind the words of Jesus in scripture to guide us. He will lead us by a still, small voice.

Furthermore, scripture says that this Holy Spirit is a guarantee of our inheritance to come. "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14). Since Jesus has risen from the dead, and if we are united to him through faith, then we too are united with him in his resurrection. Through his Spirit, Jesus will be with us to the end of the age.



## **The Story Behind the Story**

If you remember back in Chapter One of our journey, we referenced something called the gospel narrative: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. That is the framework for *the* story that each of our smaller stories is a part of. The reason that the last chapter of the gospel narrative is called restoration is because the hope that is found in *the* story is that we would be restored back to our original purpose in creation.

# **"GOD IS AT WORK IN RESTORING US TO OUR ORIGINAL INTENT."**

Remember, human beings were created by God, in the image of God, in order to live under his good authority and display his characteristics in the world around us. And now, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, God is at work in restoring us to our original intent. Scripture says that he is working *all* things for the good of our conformity into the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-30). As we walk out this life with the Spirit of Jesus, God is preparing us for an eternal life of perfect unity with him.

Though we may still feel lost at times, we are simply called to trust God and follow his Spirit in our lives as God works in us and through us to bring about the complete restoration of our story. The Bible concludes with a writing from the Apostle John called the book of Revelation. It is different from most other books in the New Testament.

First, it was a letter to persecuted churches, so it should be read in light of their historical circumstances. Second, it contains prophecy, like many Old Testament books. And third, it contains what is known as apocalyptic literature, which means that it uses wonderful imagery to portray God's ultimate consummation of history. For us it is a vision of eternity that provides hope for the future and purpose for the present.

Read Revelation 21:1 through 22:21 in your Bible and respond to the following questions.



## The Tension Behind the Story

If there's one question common to all generations and all cultures, it is the question of the afterlife. In pyramids and on cave walls, humankind's fascination with our mortality has been well-recorded. We can't help wondering what happens when we die. And today's readers of the Bible are no exception. Sure, we say we have a general idea of what takes place. Heaven is supposed to be great. Hell is supposed to be bad. But, what really happens? Do we all really spend eternity somewhere? Scripture says that eventually, "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord" (Philippians 2:10-11). The question is: Will we make that confession before we die or not?

One of Jesus' last conversations before death was with two dying men. These thieves were being crucified on either side of him. One of the men simply mocked Jesus. But the other believed Jesus was God's Son. He appealed to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Like many of us, this man sensed he would continue on after death, and he wanted the mercy only Christ could give.

Jesus gave the repentant man clear assurance: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The word *today* assured the thief of an immediate transfer from this life into heaven. No waiting around for the end of time. No holding pattern. His soul instantaneously present in God's company, in paradise.

The Bible also points to a later time when Jesus will return to earth and bring history to its consummation. Justice will

finally and fully be served, and peace will prevail. Everyone will be evaluated for his or her faithfulness in living for God's kingdom. And, with resurrected bodies, a "new heaven and a new earth" will become the final destination for those who have placed their faith in Jesus (Revelation 21:1).

In the end, the million-dollar question won't be, "What happens when you die?" but "What happened as you lived?" Eternity has begun. And those who find their place in God's story will spend it with him forever.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. What is your mental image of life after death? What sources contributed to that picture?
2. How should our view of eternity influence how we live?
3. How do you intend to continue your pursuit of finding your place in the story?

## Storyline of Chapter Four

- Each of our stories is part of a bigger story—God’s story.
- In light of eternity, your task is to find your place in *the* story.

## After Your Group Ends

- Celebrate both the journey on which you have been and the journey on which you will go.
- Connect with a Discipleship Gathering, where you can continue to explore faith and experience community.



# ABOUT REDEEMER CITY CHURCH

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**Our Mission:** Redeemer City Church exists to know and delight in God and make him known.

**Our Vision:** To see God redeem brokenness to beauty, one relationship at a time.

**Our Values:** The gospel, prayer, family, hospitality, diversity, relational evangelism, and justice.