

## **Getting Your Story Straight**

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One way to understand the Christian story is to start with our story. What is our story? If we produced a reality-television show of life on earth today, what would it reveal? We'd likely see many good things and many bad things. Here are four bad things we might see:

1. First, we would see *social breakdown*. This has many faces. It's the loneliness and isolation we feel at times. It's the hurts we've received when others have said and done unkind things. It's the high divorce rates in marriages. It's the families breaking apart. It's the gap between the wealthy and the poor. It's the injustice perpetrated by the powerful against the weak. It's the crime reports we hear with each newscast. It's the wars between countries and within countries. Despite great advancements in science, technology, and knowledge, we still cannot seem to get along. There's a great deal of social breakdown.
2. Second, we would see *natural crises*. Regardless of our belief in global warming, most acknowledge that there are significant issues facing us when it comes to the planet and its resources. Some have suggested that if the rest of the world consumed the earth's resources at the same rate as North Americans, the earth would be depleted of its resources within a few decades. Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and fires destroy homes, lives, and communities. Pollution, consumption, and production destroy animals, habitats, and environments. Life, especially in the Western world, has progressed to the point where many enjoy wealth far greater than anyone else in the world. Such wealth, however, has come with a price. It has radically impacted the natural world around us.
3. Third, we would see *future uncertainties*. At one point in history it was easy to believe in a bright future which we ourselves would bring about—a future of prosperity, peace, and perfection. We have not, however, been able to bring about that future. And the difficulties of our present cause much uncertainty about the future—do we have a future? What will it be like? If all our advanced science, philosophy, politics, and economics have not been able to produce a positive future, do we have any hope of a bright future at all?
4. Fourth, we would see *spiritual mysteries*. For a time, it was vogue to write God completely out of the story. We believed that humans were the Creator, Ruler, and Savior of the world. Some still cling to that storyline. However, more and more of us sense that there must be more. Given the challenges of contemporary life, we reach out in the hope that there is a Being greater than us who can help. But who is this Being? The world's religions offer a dizzying array of choices. Why hasn't this Being fixed the challenges of our life? At one time it seems even Christianity couldn't offer answers to that question. Christians seemed to say that God was only concerned with the "spiritual" stuff like your soul and heaven and life after death. Does this Being have anything to do with the "earthly" stuff of life right now? Is religion just an escape from the realities we face every day?

The Christian story claims that the world has not always been this way. There was a time when the world and life were drastically different. The Bible describes this time in [Gen. 1-2](#).

1. The Christian story claims that there is indeed a God, a Supreme Being. He is the creator of all things. As a result, he is concerned with and involved with all things. In the Christian story, there is no “spiritual” and “secular.” God has concern for all spheres of life.
2. Genesis claims that God created a world of *social harmony*. After creating the first human, Genesis says that it *was not good for the man to be alone* (Gen. 2:18 TNIV). Humans were “hardwired” to live in healthy relationships with others. So, God created Eve for Adam. And these first two humans, Genesis says, *were both naked, and they felt no shame.* (Gen. 2:25 TNIV). They experienced transparent and authentic community.
3. Genesis claims that God created a world of *natural stewardship*. After creating the natural world, God proclaims it all *very good* (Gen. 1:31 TNIV). Then, to ensure the continuation of creation’s beauty and fruitfulness, God appoints humans *to work it and take care of it* (Gen. 2:15 TNIV). Humans became stewards of the natural world which God created.
4. Genesis claims that God created a world with *future certainty*. God gives the humans the capacity to reproduce and the call to be *fruitful and increase in number* (Gen. 1:28 TNIV). He gives plants the capacity to continually bear fruit (Gen. 1:29). This indicates that God has created a world with the future in mind and that he’s ensured the future is abundant and certain. Humans will not have to worry if tomorrow will bring an end to the food they eat or to the children they bear.
5. Finally, Genesis claims that God created a world with *spiritual intimacy*. God creates humans in his image—they are, to their very core, a part of God (Gen. 1:27). God and the humans speak directly to one another (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:9). There is closeness and connection between God and humans.
6. This was the world as God intended. It is the world we were made to live in. It was God’s original intent.

The question, then, is this: why don’t we still have that world? What happened that transformed the world back then into the world right now? Why aren’t we experiencing now what the first humans experienced?

1. Genesis claims that life and the world began to de-create, to devolve, when the humans did one thing: they *declared their independence* from God. Gen. 3 claims that they wanted to become like God—they wanted to take charge of their own lives. The humans decided they wanted control over what was deemed right and wrong, good and bad. This was symbolized by their eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
2. This declaration revealed two things. First, it revealed *evil in the human heart*. Humans were given the freedom to choose good and evil. And their declaration of independence from God revealed the human tendency to choose evil. It was greed, pride, and selfishness which led to their decision. The second thing revealed by this declaration was *evil spiritual forces*. Gen. 3 claims that even in this pristine early world there was an evil spiritual force that collaborated with the humans’ own evil hearts to lead them to declare their independence from God. Here, that evil spiritual force took the form of a snake.
3. The declaration of independence leads to a rift between God and humans. The innocence and intimacy of their relationship is stained. It leads to social breakdown. Soon after these events we find the first murder being committed—and it takes place within a family. The declaration also leads to neglect of creation as people congregate and build a large city

(Gen. 11). We are told that the soil lost some of its fruitfulness and the earth itself was cursed by this act (Gen. 3:17-19). And as the story progresses from Gen. 1 through Gen. 11 the future becomes more and more uncertain. The first murder is followed by a man who boasts about his killings. This is followed by a flood which God sends because of the gross amount of evil in the world. This is followed by people congregating and building a city to make a name for themselves. It seems uncertain that humanity and the world will survive.

4. According to the Bible's story, it is human's declaration of independence which has contributed significantly to the challenges we see in the world today. Influenced by the evil in our own hearts and by evil spiritual forces, we have sought to live without the wisdom, guidance, and partnership of the One who created us. The result has been a mess.

But the Christian story says that God has not given up. Instead, he is working to re-create us and re-create the earth and the heavens so that we can return to this original world. God's trying to get "back to our future."

1. In the Old Testament, we see this in the words of Isaiah the prophet. God gives Isaiah a vision of the future in which relationships are restored, spiritual intimacy is experienced, and nature and creation are renewed: *17 "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. 20 "Never again will there be in it infants who live but a few days, or older people who do not live out their years; those who die at a hundred will be thought mere youths; those who fail to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. 21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. 24 Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. (Is. 65:17-25 TNIV).* God's planning a future where the former things, the hard things about life, won't even be remembered. It will be a world of certain future—no more children facing short lives; old people will live long and abundant lives. It will be a world in which the natural world/ creation is fruitful and harmonious--vineyards will bear fruit and animals will live in harmony. It will be a time of spiritual intimacy—before we even call on God he will answer.
2. In the New Testament it is a man named John who writes of God's intent to re-create and return to where we began. God grants John a vision of this future: *1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and*

be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:1-4 TNIV). 1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev. 22:1-5 TNIV). God shows John that he is working toward a future where earth and heaven are renewed. It will be a place of social harmony—John reports that the nations will be present and will find healing there together. It will be a place of spiritual intimacy—God will be our God and we will be his people; We will see the face of God. It will be a place where nature and creation fulfill their greatest potential—crystal clear water will quench our thirst and trees so healthy they actually heal us will grow on the banks. And it will be a place of a secure future—God and his son will reign over this re-created heaven and earth forever and ever.

But how is God bringing about that future? Do we have any part to play in it? The first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, says that God is bringing about that future through a *person* who comes with a *message*, a *people* who strive to *model* that future, and that God himself is acting as a *partner* who has the *means* to achieve this future.

1. At one point the *person* with the message was Moses. Then prophets like Samuel. Then Kings like David and Solomon. Each came with a *message* from God. It was a true message grounded not in subjective opinion but in objective wisdom from God. These messages revealed truth about God, his desired future, and the role we play in helping bringing it about. For example, Moses' message was summarized in the "Ten Commandments." These Commandments and their commentary in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy revealed how we could once again find social harmony (*honor your father and mother; you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor; you shall not covet your neighbor's house*), how we could once again find spiritual intimacy (*you shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an image; you shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God; remember the Sabbath*), and how we could once again become fitting stewards working and taking care of creation (for example God asks that fields lie unplowed and unused every seventh year (Ex. 23:10ff)). This not only allowed the land to rest, but provided food for nearby wild animals, and for the poor. Further, it provided rest for the ox and donkey who would ordinarily be used to plow that field). This message promised a certain future of blessing if it was lived out and pursued; curses if it was neglected and ignored (Duet. 28).
2. The *people* was a nation or kingdom called Israel. They were to become a living *model* of the *message* and thus bring about at least part of God's desired future in the present. They were to become a community where social harmony, spiritual intimacy, and natural stewardship once again appeared. That community would begin to influence other communities around the world. They would become a *blessing* and through them *all*

*peoples on earth will be blessed (Gen. 12)*. In the darkness of the present challenges, this *people* would become a *light for the Gentiles*, or nations (*Is. 42:6; 49:6*).

3. And in addition, God acted as a *partner* with the divine *means* for helping bring about this future. When needed, God rescued and liberated this people from oppressive human and spiritual powers, as in the exodus story. He would not permit any human or spiritual force to interfere with his work and the work of this people. God led each person like Moses, the prophets, and the kings so that they in turn might lead the people as they strived to live out this future. At times, this leadership involved God sharing part of himself, his Spirit, with these leaders. And God created ways for humans to experience a re-creating of their own hearts, the beginning of a way to overcome the evil within their hearts. God created a sacrificial system through which human sin could be forgiven and thus human hearts could be renewed.

The second part of the Bible, called the New Testament, similarly says that God is bringing about that future through a *person* who comes with a *message*, a *people* who strive to *model* that future, and that God himself is acting as a *partner* who has the *means* to achieve this future.

1. The primary *person* is Jesus, the Son of God. Others will follow him—leaders like Paul, Peter, Matthew, and John. Jesus comes with a message of divine truth about God, his desired future, and our role in bringing that about. It is a truth that is universal. For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revisits the Ten Commandments and reveals their deepest meaning (*Matt. 5-7*). He teaches how we can live in social harmony (do not lust; do not divorce; love your enemy (*Matt. 5*)) and how we can find spiritual intimacy (by seeking God instead of using religion for our own purposes (*Matt. 6*)). Jesus calms our fears about the future by teaching how God provides for all of his creation and will provide for us (*Matt. 7*). Jesus called this future the “kingdom of God” and it is the central theme of his message. His followers likewise come with messages about this kingdom.
2. Through Jesus, God acts as a *partner* with the divine *means* for helping bring about this kingdom. When needed, Jesus intervenes directly and miraculously to help this future break into the present. For example Jesus casts evil spirits out of people (*Mk. 1*) spelling the beginning of the end of the power of evil spiritual forces. Through his death on the cross, Jesus will gain ultimate victory over these forces (*Col. 2:15*). Jesus forgives and heals a paralyzed man (*Mk. 2*) demonstrating his ability to reverse the corruption of creation which resulted in the paralysis. Jesus calms a raging storm (*Mk. 4*) restoring creation to a balanced order. Ultimately, however, Jesus’ death and resurrection were the greatest means for re-establishing this kingdom. Jesus took upon himself the consequences of all the social breakdown, natural crises, future uncertainties, and spiritual mysteries. He sacrificed himself to save us from these consequences. His death forever closed the gap between humans and God. And in his resurrection, Jesus gained victory forever over death and marked the beginning of new life for all—new life that would blossom into a better world and a better life. Finally, Jesus provided the Holy Spirit to recreate humans from the inside out and to equip humans with talents so that we too could play a role in bringing about this future.

3. This people, us, in the New Testament is called “the church.” We would become a living *model of the message* and thus bring about at least part of God’s desired future in the present. They were to become a community where social harmony, spiritual intimacy, and natural stewardship once again appeared. We would begin to influence other communities around the world. They would become in the words of Jesus, the *salt of the earth* and the *light of the world* (Matt. 5:13-16). It would be our mission and privilege to continue experiencing recreation through the Spirit, equipping through the Spirit, and to continue living out this future right now, inviting others to join this kingdom, until Jesus returns and finally and fully ushers in the kingdom in its fullest and most satisfying form.