

The Story / Unit 5: Out of the Ashes
Chapter 21: The Heart of the OT Story
February 22, 2015

We've reached chapter 21 of The Story – which is a real milepost! We're doing a 31 week study of the Bible, and we are up to chapter 21, which is the end of the Old Testament. You see, the Bible is divided into two parts: the stuff before Jesus – that's the Old Testament; and the stuff after Jesus – that's the New Testament. Jesus is the dividing line. This week was about chapter 21. It's about Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and Ezra reading the law of God to the people who had pretty much forgotten it, and the prophet Malachi challenging the people to put God first again – those are chronologically the last stories of the Old Testament.

And ... it's not much of an ending! I mean, if you've been reading through the story, it might seem like this part doesn't end well. Now, the Jews are better off than they were before. They had been in exile; now they are home. Their temple had been destroyed; now it was rebuilt – kind of. But even though they are back home, their promised land was no longer their own. And their king is dead. Nevertheless, the Jews are getting a chance for a restart with God.

But those who were perceptive back then had to be thinking, "Is this what God promised us? Is this what life with God is going to look like now! It's not that good! There's got to be more to God's story than this!" "This life can't be God's dream for us, we hope. It's certainly not what we dreamed it would be when we came home!" ...

Have you ever heard most of a story, but you missed the ending? It can be irritating. I've been watching a TV series called The Arrow." A couple episodes back the Arrow fought a duel with the arch-villain Ra's al Ghul, who kicked his tail, and left him for dead. At least his friends thought he was dead. Well I recorded the episode where the Arrow makes his comeback. I was kind of pumped. I was curled up on my sofa, watching as the suspense built, and then I discovered that my DVR didn't record the last 15 minutes of the show. I missed the climax. Now that's really annoying! Well, that's kind of what the end of the Old Testament feels like.

Are you serious, God? This is the ending? There's got to be more to the story than this!

A few weeks ago some of our kids watched the Super Bowl up on that screen. It looked like New England had the game wrapped up, until Jermaine Kearse of the Seahawks made one of the most spectacular catches in Super Bowl history. And Tom Brady, the New England quarterback, is on the sidelines shaking his head: "This is unbelievable! This is how game ends?!" And right after that catch we had a technical issue up in our booth, and we lost the video feed. Our kids didn't get to see the ending of the game. They didn't get to see the amazing interception that sealed the game for New England. The New England fans kind of felt like Tom Brady after that first catch. "Really?! That's how this thing ends?!" Which is kind of like what the Old Testament feels like: "Are you serious, God! This is how it ends?" They didn't know something even more spectacular was coming.

Do you hate it when the ending of a story is missing, or it's just not right? Here's a clip from one of my favorite episodes of the Big Bang Theory – Sheldon and Amy. ** BBT clip ** Well that's kind of what the end of the Old Testament story feels like – like you want to peel off your face and shred it into confetti ... because it can't end this way! This cannot be what God meant! There has to be more to the story than this!

Well here's what I want to do this morning. I want to kind of step back and look at the whole Old Testament. I'm not going to get bogged down in any of the details – we've been digging in this stuff for 21 weeks. I want to try to give you as simply as possible the heart of the Old Testament story. Three big ideas you just can't afford to miss; three big ideas that God was trying to teach them, and he's still trying to teach us. This is what it's all about. Now I'm going to start off by letting you watch a rewind of the Old Testament story. It's pretty creative, and kind of pulls together where we've been. And then we're going to explore 3 big ideas that can change the way you do life with God.

Now, that is kind of a terrible ending, isn't it? You know the story can't be over. Well, let me show you why... (Genesis 1.1) The Story starts with the most revolutionary words ever written. "In the beginning God." Now it's not talking about God's beginning; it's talking about ours. In our

beginning God already was. In our beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And those are just incredible words! We discover that God just speaks, and stuff happens. He's got that kind of power. And we learn that as big as this universe is, God is bigger. We learn that we are not alone, and we are not an accident. Most people think we are, an accident; some of you may think we are. But we are here on purpose ... on God's purpose.

A few verses later we find out what God's purpose is for us. God says, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us... So God created us in his own image. In the image of God he created us; male and female he created us." (Genesis 1.26-27) Do you know why? Do you know why of all the creatures of our earth, he made us in his image? Because he has a special purpose for us, a special dream for us. -- We were created to do life with God. That's why you are here. You were created to do life with God; to be loved by God, and to love him back. Now if that doesn't blow your mind, you don't get it. For some reason, the in the beginning God, the God who always has been, the God of infinite power, that God wants to do life with you. That's why you are here. And when we choose to do life with God, life works – even when it's hard. And when we choose not to do life with God, when we reject his purpose for us, life gets really messy, and really empty, really fast.

Guys, none of the rest of the Bible makes sense unless you get this part. This is God's dream – that we do life with him. This is God's purpose for you and me. Right there, on page 1. If you don't get this part, none of the rest of The Story will make sense. We were created to do life with God.

But there's a catch. Doing life with God requires that we trust him. And sometimes that's easy; sometimes it's not. Sometimes doing life with God makes perfect sense to us; but sometimes doing life with God is really confusing – to our muddled little minds. He'll ask us to do things we don't want to do; he'll ask us to do things that seem too hard. "Just trust me," he says. In fact that is pretty much the big struggle of the Old Testament story. God says, "Trust me." And way too often we say ... "I don't think so, not on this one."

It started in the garden. (Genesis 2.16-17) God says, "You can eat from any of the trees in the garden; any of them ... except one. If you eat from

that one, you die. Trust me.” And even though everything else is permissible to us, we obsess over the one thing that is not.” You’ve been there; you’ve done that. We don’t trust God. “We won’t die! God, you are holding out on us. You are holding us back. We’ll do better if we don’t do life with God, God’s way.” You’ve been there, you’ve thought that, you’ve done that. We are stubborn, self-centered critters.

And the biggest battles they fought in the Old Testament story were over whether to trust God, or not. And some did, trust him – and God did remarkable things through them.

- (Genesis 12.1-2) God tells Abraham to pack his bags and start walking. He’d give him a destination and directions later. And Abraham did it! Have you ever obeyed God when you didn’t have a clue where it would take you?
- Then he tells Abraham that he and his wife are going to have a kid ... even though Abraham and Sarah were way too old for that. And Abraham trusted... that the “in the beginning God” could do the impossible. Go figure. Because actually it’s kind of dumb to think the in the beginning God couldn’t do something like that!
- (Genesis 22.2) Then when his kid grows up, God tells Abraham to kill him. Are you serious?! And this blows my mind: Abraham still trusts God; he was willing to do it. But God stopped him – it was just a test. And through this guy who trusted him, God kicked off his plan to pull us back.

Story after story – some of God’s people trusted him.

- (Genesis 50.20) God tells Joseph that he would lead his people. And yet his life falls apart. He’s sold into slavery; winds up in prison on trumped up charges. Will you trust God when your life is a mess, and it’s not your fault? Or will you use your disappointment in God to justify your disobedience. You see, that’s what we usually do. We use our disappointment with God to justify pushing God away. But Joseph didn’t. He kept kept trusting that God was still good, even when his life was not. Remarkable! And God used him to rescue his people. Do you trust him?
- (Exodus 3.10) God tells Moses to trust him. Moses is a fugitive, wanted for murder. And God tells him to go challenge the most powerful man in his world -- the guy who wants him dead -- so Moses can lead God’s people out of Egypt. Moses says, “That’s crazy! I’m

not your guy!” Have you ever said something like that to God? But God tells him, “I’ll be with you. Trust me.” And Moses did trust him, and through him God worked some of the most extraordinary miracles in the whole Bible and he rescued his people.

- (Acts 13.22) God told David to trust him. And David did ... amazing! Even as a boy David trusted God, fighting against Goliath. He trusted him when he was a fugitive, when King Saul wanted him dead. He trusted God in battle after battle – he was a warrior king. David even trusted God when he was at his worst – when he stole another man’s wife. He trusted that God was right when he punished him him. And he trusted that God would forgive him. We struggle with both of those. We struggle to trust God when he convicts us of sin; and we struggle to accept his forgiveness. But maybe that kind of trust is why David is called “a man after God’s own heart.”

God says, “Trust me. Trust me when you understand me; trust me when you don’t. Trust me when you agree with me; trust me when you don’t.” And guys – listen – trust is the biggest deal in doing life with God. All through the Old Testament story there are these guys, and ladies, who trust him. They learned to tell God, “Whatever, whenever, wherever, however -- we’re in.” Which is what he wants from us: “Whatever, whenever, wherever, however -- we’re in.”

But all through the story there were more who didn’t ... trust him. In fact, their failure to trust him, their refusal to trust becomes one of the biggest themes of story. Moses leads God’s people out of Egypt into the wilderness, and God tells the people: “Trust me to take care of you.” And even though they had seen his incredible power, they didn’t ... trust him. Even though we have seen God’s exquisite goodness and his incredible power, we still struggle to trust him. Out in that wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, God’s people start grumbling, and whining, and complaining – against God! Well complaining erodes trust. We lose sight of how amazing God is, and how blessed we are.

So they started nitpicking at Moses, and wondering whether they would have been better off to stay in Egypt as slaves. We do the same. We get this idea about how we think God should take care of us, and when God doesn’t sign on to our agenda, we start to grumble, and whine, and complain. So God made them stay in the wilderness for 40 years. He tried

to teach them to trust him with things like manna, and quail. You see, God wants us to do life with him even it is hard. He wants us to follow his path even when other paths make more sense to us.

It was the same during the period of the Judges. After Israel captures a foothold in their promised land, God raised up guys like Deborah, and Gideon, and Samson, and Samuel. Great stories, but it's not a time of great trust in God. There is this cycle that keeps repeating itself. The Israelites would do evil in God's sight. So God would raise up an enemy to defeat them in battle, to oppress them. Finally the people would call out to God for help, and God would raise up a judge, a hero to rescue them. Sin, leads to pain, leads to repentance, leads to deliverance. God keeps saying, "Just trust me!" But they'd won't learn their lesson. Over and over, 12 times this cycle is repeated in the book of judges. Probably because that's how a lot of us live. We get immersed in sin – because we don't trust him, till the pain overwhelms us. And then we finally ask God for help, and for some reason he's still there for us. But when the pain subsides, we go back to the sin. Sound familiar?

It was the same during the period of the kings of Israel and Judah. A few of them trusted God, but most didn't. There were 39 kings of Israel and Judah; and every one of their kings got a grade from God. And God doesn't grade kings on how the economy is doing, or on whether the borders are secure, or on whether their poll numbers are high. Only one thing matters to God: is the king willing to do life with God, God's way? Is the king willing to trust God, even when trusting him seems to make little sense – from our point of view.

As we walked through their stories, we discovered that their biggest sin was idolatry. Which seems a little strange to us, at first – worshiping some pathetic wannabe god. But idolatry kind of boils down to this: in reality idolatry is putting anything else in God's place. And we all do that, a lot! It is putting anything, or any person in God's place. But at its heart, idolatry is fundamentally a failure to trust him. And it's our big temptation too.

What amazes me in the story is that God keeps pursuing them – this stubborn people. What amazes me is that God keeps pursuing us, you and me. The persistence of our God blows my mind. He won't give up on his dream – to do life with us, to get us to trust him. Over and over again

God proves that he could be trusted. And when God's people would drift anyway, he would send these prophets. Their basic job was scold the people for not trusting him, and to warn the people about what would happen if they didn't trust him. Their words were often hard, but their purpose was grace. You see, God could have simply washed his hands of these twits (he could simple wash his hands of us). But he keeps pursuing us. He keeps giving us these restarts. There is this passion in our God to do life with us. He won't settle for less, unless we get to that point where we simply won't turn around, where our refusal to trust him becomes hardened. That's such a dangerous place – because God won't force himself on us. He'll keep nudging us, but he won't force us – because that would destroy love.

Well, near the end of the Old Testament story both Israel and Judah are crushed, by God, because of their refusal to trust him. For Israel, it was their last straw. They would disappear from history. That's it. For Judah, there is still one more chance, one more restart. So they go home from their exile, and they rebuild their temple, and they rebuild their walls, and their recommit themselves to their God ... sort of.

But there is this sense: Is this all there is? Is this what God promised? I guess they had their temple back – although it's pitiful compared to the one they had before. I guess they had their land back, but their king was still dead. Life was hard, life was fragile. It would have been a rather pathetic end to an amazing story except... except for this.

You see, there is one more thread to the Old Testament story I haven't shown you yet. There was this serpent who seduced Adam and Eve in the garden. Afterwards God tells the serpent. "From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, (even though) and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3.15) You will strike his heel; but he will crush your head. In other words, someday this son of Adam is going to kick your tail. It will cost him – it will cost God; but someday there will be a confrontation, and you will be crushed by a son of Adam – sort of. There's the first clue that God has a plan – a plan that goes way beyond these Old Testament stories.

And then there is this strange scene in the story of Abraham. What do you think goes through Abraham's mind when God makes the strangest and toughest "request" of a man ever? Listen, this blows my mind. God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son – yes Isaac, whom you love so much..." Now you can't see it in the English, but there is a little word in the Hebrew that means something like "please." It's a very strange word for God. God doesn't usually say "please." But the feel of this sentence in the Hebrew is kind of like this: "Abraham, please take your son, your only son, the son you love so much ... and take him to the land of Moriah ... and kill him." Say what?!

And, why would God ask please? Maybe because, from God's point of view, God sees something Abraham can't see. God looks 2000 years into the future. And God can see that on this same mountain he would ... kill his own son, for us. And here's what he's asking Abraham: "Would you be willing to do for me, what I am planning to do for you?" Another clue; another breadcrumb.

Fast forward a few hundred years to Moses. God is doing all these miracles through Moses to convince Pharaoh to let his people go. But the last one is special. They are told that every firstborn male will die that night, unless ... God tells each Jewish family to take a perfect male lamb,. Then they are to slaughter that lamb. And they are to smear some of the blood on the wooden doorframes of their houses. And that night, when the angel of death comes to kill the firstborns, any house marked by that blood on their doorposts would be passed over. Isn't that weird?

Why would God ask them to perform such a strange, almost macabre ritual? Because ... from God's Point of View, it isn't just about the rescue of his people from Egypt. God is looking ahead to an infinitely more important rescue mission. It's coming! And God was leaving some clues, God is dropping a trail of bread crumbs that will lead directly to ... Jesus. Over a thousand years later God would send his first-born son – his only son – to die. He would be called the lamb of God – God's sacrifice for us ... a perfect, unblemished lamb. And he would be crucified at the same time of the evening they were killing their lambs for that first Passover. You see, God paints the blood of his Son on our doorposts – if we will let him. It's just another clue that something spectacular is coming. Another clue that points us to Jesus.

So the prophets keep telling them, “It’s not over yet; something mind-blowing is coming! God’s going to do something that will blow your socks off!”

The prophet Jeremiah says: “A day is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah (that’s us); I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jeremiah 31) We will do life with God, the way he meant it to be.

The prophet Zechariah says: “Shout in triumph... Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey. Your king will bring peace to the nations. His realm will stretch from sea to sea.” (9) And it does!

The prophet Daniel says: “I saw someone like a son of man (that’s Jesus) coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal – it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.” (13-14) You can bet your life on it!

And the prophet Malachi, in the very last chapter of the Old Testament, he says: “The Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture.” (2)

And that’s how the Old Testament story ends . . . without an ending. But with a hope, with an expectation that God is not done yet. They wait; they know there’s another chapter; they trust God will keep his promises. They know the best part is still coming. So they wait ... for 400 years ... But that’s next week.