

The Story / Grace Gone Viral
31: The End of Time
May 3, 2015

PART 1: WHAT WAS

That's how we started this journey through The Story, 8 months ago. And the words of the song still get to me:

- If I could, I'd rewrite history, I'd choose differently, if I could
- I'd leave out the part where I broke your heart ... (Ever been there, felt that? I have.)
- Can you hear us cry? (God) Wishing we could turn back time ...
- To feel your breath when branches move, take one more sunset walk with you... (Have you ever ached for a touch from God? I have.)
- Could there be something more? Will it ever be the way it was before? (Ever wondered that? After where you've been, and what you've done? I have.)

It's a powerful song! Now we started our journey through The Story back in September – 31 weeks through the storyline of the Bible. And right there at the beginning of The Story we could see the mess we made when we refused to trust God; and we could see that the mess we made was one we couldn't fix.

It says, In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth – and they were perfect. And he created us in his own image, so we could share life with him. And it was perfect. But maybe God's greatest gift to us was ... freedom. He could have forced himself on us, but that wouldn't be love. So God gave us the freedom to push him away. And ... boy did we! It was Paradise lost. The rich intimacy we once had with our God was lost -- we still feel that emptiness. The rich intimacy we once had with each other was lost -- we still know it could be different, and so much better. Even our harmony with creation itself was lost. Because sin corrupts: it always has, it always will. It always drives a wedge between us and God, between us, even between us and our world.

Of all the things we lost, maybe these two are the biggest. (1) When we were kicked out of the garden, we were separated from the tree of life, we lost the tree of life. Which means we die, sometimes tragically, sometimes

painfully. But death is one of the givens. Unless he comes back first, every one of us is going to die. (2) Maybe worse than that, we lost the very thing that we were created for, the very thing that brings meaning, purpose, richness to life. We lost that peace with God, that unmitigated life with God.

And ever since then there has been this hole in our heart that nothing else can fill. We try. We try to fill it that hole in our heart with some person, or some pleasure, or some purpose. But nothing else can fill that God-shaped hole in your heart. There is an emptiness inside us without him. There is a longing for something we can't quite define. We know that there must be something more, but it is elusive ... we think.

Bottom line, guys, we broke it, and we can't fix it. So the words of that song ring true: If I could, I'd rewrite history, I'd choose differently, if I could... To feel his breath when branches move, take one more sunset walk with Him ... Could there be something more? Will it ever be the way it was before? ... Well, the answer is ... Yes.

PART 2: WHAT IS

There have been 31 chapters in this Story. From week 2 to week 30 we tracked how God worked to fix what we broke. It started with a promise to an old dead guy named Abraham. (Gen 12.1-3) God said, "Through you I am going to build a nation, and through your people all the world will be blessed." God says, "I am going to fix what you broke, and I am going to use your descendants as my tools."

So we tracked the stories of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph – we call them the patriarchs. Eventually these "Jews" are enslaved by the Egyptians, so God raises up a guy named Moses to rescue them. We call it the Exodus. And through Moses God gives his people the Law – rules on how to do life with God. And the Law worked, sort of. It proved to us that we can't fix what we broke. We can't do it on our own. We are not strong enough, we are not smart enough, we are not good enough to fix what we broke.

Then we tracked the stories of these Jews as God took them to their Promised Land. And in that promised land they tried to do life with God.

And they were terrible at it. They kept getting sidetracked. They kept putting other things in God's place – like we're all prone to do. It's called idolatry – trying to fill that hole in our heart with anything other than God.

So God sent prophets to his people. These prophets had this special connection with God, and God would tell them things his people needed to know. They would tell God's people how they were messing up, and they would tell God's people what would happen if they didn't put God back in his rightful place. But maybe more important than any of that, they began to tell God's people that something was coming ... some one was coming. Someone who would fix what we broke once for all.

Then we spent 6 weeks on Jesus, because he was the one, the one the prophets had promised. He was the one who would fix what we broke once for all. We looked at the weird way Jesus entered our world: born to a peasant girl, branded as a bastard. Weird, but fitting: because it meant that he came for all of us, no matter where we've been, no matter what we've done. We looked at the extraordinary things he said, and the extraordinary things he did. He was no ordinary man. We looked at his extraordinary claims. He claimed to be more than a man; he claimed to be the Son of God. And on Easter we saw how God the Father backed that claim, by raising him from the dead.

And we saw how God fixed what we broke. You see, we look into a spiritual mirror and we see a mess. We see our lust, and our gluttony, and our greed, and our laziness, and our anger, and our envy, and our pride. And we can't fix us. I can't fix me, and you can't fix you – and you know it. So Jesus went to a cross – not for his sin, but for ours. And if we will accept it – if we will accept him ... The Bible says, "If anyone is - in Christ - he becomes a new person altogether – the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new." (2C 5.17) We get to start over, every day, with Jesus. Because only he can really fix what's broken. And he does. And now when a Jesus follower looks in the mirror, he sees Christ in him – the only one who can fill that hole in your heart. And when God looks at you, he sees Christ in you – and he starts rebuilding that intimacy we lost so long ago in the garden. That's the Heart of the Story.

Then for the last 3 weeks we have tracked how grace went viral. We Jesus followers just exploded into our world. Our message was

captivating. It still is. Our boldness, our courage, our joy was enthralling. It still can be. But as amazing as the church was, as amazing as the church can be – this is not God’s dream. We are simply a tool, a means, not the end. There’s more coming ... thank God... Thank God, because so much is still broken, and we know it can be so much better; it should be so much better. And that’s what the last chapter of The Story is all about: Chapter 31, The End of Time ... sort of.

Aren’t you glad there is more to The Story? I mean, if this is it, it’s still a mess – we’re still a mess – even with Christ in us. I know we get these glimpses of God, and they stir something deep inside us. We get these glimpses of what could be, of what should be. We look up into the night sky, and the beauty and the immensity of it all takes our breath away – but it doesn’t last. Some piece of music, some work of art captivates us. Some act of kindness, some act of generosity, some act of love enchants us. Sometimes in worship we sense his presence, and it’s powerful.

But to be honest, to be real, we know so much is still broken. We are still broken. We try to love, but we’re not very good at it. We always end up hurting the people we love. We try to build friendships, but we’re not very good at it. We fail our friends, and they fail us. We try to be good, but we’re not very good at it. Even with Christ in us we find ourselves disappointing him so often. It’s just broke. These bodies are broken – eventually they fade and die. These hearts are broken. Our wills are broken.

And when broken people do life together ... we just make messes. Just watch the news, or read the news. Here at home our country is a mess. We’re watching right now as race wars are heating up. Lines are being drawn over gay marriage, and whether Christians have any real freedom of religion. Lines are being drawn over illegal immigration. The government keeps growing, and our debt keeps growing. Even though they tell us we’re in an economic recovery, it’s anemic at best. Our electorate is growing more and more polarized. Moral values and civility are out; vulgarity and rudeness are in. Our country is a mess, guys.

And it’s not just here, our world is a mess. ISIS, Al Qaeda, with their growing war on Christians and all the rest of western civilization. Chaos in the Middle East. Growing tensions with Russia. Growing tensions with

China. Europe is falling apart. I looked at one website that was tracking 65 nations engaged in some kind of war, and 638 separatist groups, or militias stirring up trouble right now.

And we have an even greater problem. We believe there is a devil, a Satan. He hates God. He is immensely powerful, but he can't defeat God, so he goes after what God loves – that's us. And he's really good at stirring the mess. Here's what else he's good at. He's really good at stealing our hope. In fact, that may be what he's best at – stealing our hope.

He whispers: "This is all there is. It all started by accident; it will all end by accident. Then there is nothing. Just make your own way as best you can, because this is as good as it gets." It's no wonder people are depressed. It's no wonder people drink too much, or eat too much, or sleep too much, or watch too much TV. It's no wonder we become incredibly self-absorbed. Because ... if we allow ourselves to feel the longing we have inside for something more, but have no real hope that it will ever come about – it's too much to bear. You see, God planted eternity in our hearts, but Satan does whatever he can to dim that hope.

PART 3: WHAT WILL BE

Which is why the last chapter of The Story is so important to us: Chapter 31, The End of Time. Because in the book of Revelation God gives us a glimpse of what is coming. He gives us a reason to hope – not a faint, grasping hope, but a robust, dazzling, confident hope.

Now I know that Revelation doesn't read that way to a lot of you. Because it's kind of a weird book, a confusing book, too! It's chock full of things that are just strange.

- These angels who are not sweet, or gentle, or tame. Incredible powerful, and incredibly destructive – when God tells them to be.
- There is this scroll, fastened with seals. And every time a seal is broken some disaster pours out on earth. And trumpets, and whenever they are blown, some disaster pours out on earth. And these bowls, and whenever they are poured out some disaster pours out on earth. It's scary!

- We read about this terrible beast, and this terrible dragon, and this antichrist.
- And there are these strange numbers, with deeper meanings – like 666, and 144,000.
- And there is tribulation for those who are Jesus followers, and war.
- And there is God – described in ways that stagger the mind, and Jesus – described in ways that are unlike anything else in the Bible.

It's a weird book, to us. And anyone who thinks they understand what it all means is fooling themselves ... and they'll fool you too if they can. Some guys think they have it all figured out. But all we know is that every time someone says they have it all figured out, every time they tell you who the antichrist is, who the beast is, and when it's all going down – so far they have been wrong every time. Reckless, irresponsible games.

It is a weird book to us, but not quite so weird to the first Christians. When the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation he used a code that was pretty common back then. And even though we don't have all the details of the code, we do know the message he was trying to get to us.

He was writing to Jesus followers who were living in a world that was a mess – even messier than ours. By the time he wrote this letter all the other apostles are dead – killed for their trust in Jesus. By the time he wrote this book it was getting really hard to be a Jesus follower in this messy world. He was writing to people whose family or friends had been beheaded or torn apart by animals in the arena; family or friends who had been dipped in oil and burned alive for their trust in Jesus. It was a tough time for Jesus followers. In fact John himself writes this letter from exile. It seems like Satan is winning; it seems like the antichrist is winning. It seems like the church could lose.

And John just chuckles, and he says – to us – guys, it ain't over yet! We know how this thing is going to end. It may look like Satan is winning, but Jesus is coming back. The first time Jesus came, it was to die ... for us. But the next time he comes, he's coming as a warrior, and he's going to kick some tail, and he's going to make things right. Do you know what the message of the first 20 chapters of the book of Revelation is? God wins. That's it: God wins. And when God wins, you make sure you're on his side.

And then ... in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation the apostle John tells us what we will experience after God wins that final battle. You see, he has this vision. He says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared." God starts over – with a new heaven, and a new earth. That's what's coming guys – a new heaven and a new earth. It's going to happen!

Now Satan has managed to diminish that hope even from many of us who know it's coming. We have the stupidest ideas of eternity.

- Some think eternity will be a never ending church service. We'll worship God forever, singing one glorious hymn after another, forever and ever, and ever, and ever, Amen. Guys, some of our worship services here at Capital City are really good, and some of my sermons are flat out extraordinary – but I'm ready to be done after an hour or so. Aren't you? Listen guys: our first Paradise was a place of wonder, and beauty, and adventure, and intimacy. Do you honestly think that in eternity we will be sent to church forever because that's better somehow? That is not what is written on our hearts.
- For others, eternity is whatever we like best on earth on steroids. Kind of a designer heaven. To a fanatical golfer, eternity is eternal golf. To those of us who like to eat, it is an eternal buffet where you can eat whatever you want, as much as you want, and never get fat. For some of you eternity is a lake where the fish are always this big, and always biting. For some Muslims, it's 70 virgins. For the 70 virgins, that's their hell. Stupid pictures, spending an eternity self-absorbed. And eternity no bigger than our feeble little imaginations, where it's all about me, what I want, what I like. How shallow, how boring, how small. To think we can dream better dreams than God! To think what we can write a better ending to this Story than God can!

The Bible says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1C 2.9) it will blow your minds! But God does give us some hints, some clues, as to what some of it will be like. That's part of what Jesus was doing when he was here the first time. He kept working these miracles – John calls them signs. Listen, guys, Jesus didn't heal the sick to empty their hospitals. He

didn't feed the thousands so they'd never be hungry again. He didn't cast out demons so they'd never afflict us again. His miracles were signpost, they were pointers, they were glimpses of the kind of kingdom he will build for us. They were peeks at the happily ever after.

Look at what he did: when Jesus touched the blind, all the beauty of the world was opened to them. When he touched the deaf, they could hear laughter, music, wind and rain. When he touched the lame, they danced. When he cast out demons he pointed forward to a time when Satan's power over us will be broken, completely. When he raised a corpse, he pointed to a time when death itself will be destroyed. Do you see what he is doing? He is giving us a peek, a glimpse at what is coming. Whatever is broken, he will fix. Listen to what it says in Revelation: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." (Revelation 21.4)

There are two more pieces to this new heaven and new earth that are just huge.

- The last chapter of Revelation describes this river, filled with the water of life, flowing from the throne of God. And it says that on each side of the river grew a ... tree of life. Remember that tree of life, in the garden of Eden, that we lost when we were cast out. It's back. And it says, "The leaves will be used as medicine to heal the nations. No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there." (Rev 22.2-3)
- And one more piece – it's the best piece of all, I think – though we don't know it yet. John says, "I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them (again).'" (Rev 21.3) Remember that intimacy with God we had in the garden, that sin destroyed? It's back – and that's what you ache for more than anything else, whether you know it or not. Because that's what you were made for.

I don't think anyone captures the wonder of eternity better than C. S. Lewis. Here's how the Chronicles of Narnia end. "Then Aslan turned to them and said, "You do not look so happy as I mean you to be." Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often." "No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not

guessed?” Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. “There was a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended; this is the morning.”

“And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which on one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.” (C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle)

Do you feel it? Are you ready?

- We met pain in a garden where we lived a lie
- We met hope in a manger and a baby’s cry
- Rescued by hands bleeding grace
- Are we ready to see his face, on the great day?