

The Story: Three Trees

Believe it or not, we now come to the end of our year-long journey through this book, *The Story*. I am so grateful for all of you who have shared with me how this has enriched your understanding of the Bible. Our hope was to look at scripture from 30,000 feet—to see the great themes and most of all, discover how Jesus appears throughout the Story, from the earliest moments to the end. We have called that “The Scarlet Thread.”

Last week, Pastor Larry preached on the last chapter of the Story. It was a marvelous message on heaven, and if you haven’t heard it, you really should. And next week is Bluegrass... and we launch into our series on *Fearless Questions* with a sermon on—drum roll please—Predestination! But today, I want to take one final lap around the Story.

One of our goals for this year was to give you the confidence to tell the Story to others. Disciple-making (our mission as a church) requires that you be able to share God’s Story and your part in it. So we provided tools to summarize the main points. We gave an outline focused on the roles that Jesus played: Creator, Priest, Redeemer, King, Prophet, Man and Re-creator. But that’s complicated. We also described the Story with four words: Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, and Consummation. That’s shorter, but a lot of churchy words with many syllables. So is there a simpler way to summarize the Story?

Cyndi and I were in San Francisco last week and while there, we climbed up to the Coit Tower and then rode the elevator to the top with 8 others stuffed inside. So what would be our two-minute elevator speech covering the main points of the gospel? How about this: Three Trees. We can summarize the whole of the Story by talking about Three Trees.

The first tree appears in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2. God has just created everything and the high point comes when he creates man in his own image. God places Adam in a paradise called Eden. It is a beautiful and perfect place for them to enjoy each other without hindrance. Adam has access to everything in that garden with one exception. Genesis 2: 15:

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

You know what happens next. The Serpent tempts Eve by making God look stingy because he has withheld the fruit from that one tree. And he offers the ultimate enticement: if you eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, you will know everything... just like God!" Of course, she bites... literally. And the curse of sin enters paradise. At its core, all sin starts here: we don't want God to be God. We want to call our own shots. We want to decide what is right and wrong. We want to be god.

It is such a shame. God created a perfect setting in which to enjoy his beloved friends. He withheld only one thing, yet they choose to believe the lie, eat the forbidden fruit and as a consequence, their relationship with God is broken and they are cast out of the garden. Thus begins the Story; our human story! Our story is of rebellion and alienation from the God who created and loves us. Let's call this first tree the Tree of Separation. In that moment of disobedience, sin entered the world, a wedge was driven between God and us. We lost Paradise through The Tree of Separation.

That's the beginning of the Story. Now let's jump to the end... Revelation 22. As you heard last week, Revelation is a glimpse of our future—of this earth when creation is restored and all things made new—Heaven on earth. Listen for the second tree.

¹Then 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 ²down 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. ³No longer will there be any curse.

Doesn't this sound lush? A crystal river filled with life-giving water flows from the very throne of God, down the middle of a great street and feeds the roots of a great tree—so large and beautiful that its trunk straddles the river like a great Banyon tree. This is the Tree of Life. Its branches bear fruit, and every month it is a new crop, each one as fresh and luscious as the last. I grew up in apple country. Every year we waited for the fall harvest, and when the apples were picked, we began the year-long wait for a new crop. Imagine if every month, the tree produced a fresh crop of delicious fruit. Even the leaves of the Tree of Life are good and healthy to eat.

These images represent deeper truths. Twelve always represented the tribes of Israel—God's chosen people. In the end, we see God has restored his relationship with the Jewish people, but not just them. To whom do the leaves provide healing? The nations—this was code for the gentiles. God promised Abraham that his people would bless the entire world. We now discover that Gentiles, too, are grafted into the tree and enjoy a perfect relationship with God in Paradise. This is the Tree of Life—a sweet, glorious glimpse of a perfect future relationship with God.

But guess what! This isn't the first time we see the Tree of Life. Do you remember where it first appeared? Way back in the beginning. Back to Genesis 2:

⁸Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Ah, did you see that? There were two great trees in the middle of the garden—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which would become the Tree of Separation, and right there next to it was the Tree of Life! This same tree as in Revelation! From the beginning, God intended his children should eat of this tree; to enjoy an eternal life in relationship with their Heavenly Father. But when they fell under the curse of sin, God kicked them out. Why? Because, he didn't want them to eat of the Tree of Life in their broken state. He did not want them to live eternally in a state of separation... eternally under the curse of sin.

That's what it means when we read in Revelation that "no longer will there be any curse." What curse? The curse of sin—the curse that God placed on them back in the Garden—the curse which drove them out and away from the Tree of Life in the first place. In the end, the picture we have is of Paradise restored. We are back in Eden. There's the Tree of Life again, and we have access to it. Free to eat of its fruit and its life-giving leaves, we are invited again into the eternal relationship with God that he intended from the beginning... before we fell to sin.

So how do we get from the Tree of Separation to the Tree of Life? How do we escape the curse that holds us in bondage? Well, we have one more tree. The tallest, most prominent spar on the biblical landscape is The Tree of Salvation. Paul writes about it in Galatians 3:13:

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Peter also wrote about this in his first letter:

²⁴[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

From the beginning, it was God's intent that we would live in the shade and fragrance of the Tree of Life. But in our disobedience, we were expelled from Paradise; our relationship with God was broken.

But God never gave up. The entire Story is an account of how God set about restoring that relationship, repairing that breach, lifting that curse. The whole Story is about how God works to lead us back to the Tree of Life. And every pathway converges at the foot of the tree that stood on Calvary. It is a savage and sweet

irony that the one who created the tree from which would be carved those beams, allowed himself to be nailed to them so that he might take upon himself the curse of sin and heal all our wounds. The Creator murdered by His own creation, on a tree of his creation, so that he might reunite what had been alienated and swing open again the gates of Paradise.

In First Corinthians 13, Paul writes of three great attributes: Faith, Hope and Love. Might we speak of the first tree as the Tree of Faith? If only Adam and Eve had the faith to believe God was good and generous, that he could be trusted to give them what was good and withhold from them what would harm; if only they had the faith to let God be God, the Story would have been very different. That was the Tree of Faith.

Now we look ahead with longing to the Tree of Hope. We are so sick of terrorists and politicians and Zika and earthquakes and cancer and divorce. We long for more, don't we? We hope for the day when all will be restored; all will be made new. One day we will sit again beneath the fragrant and lush shade of the tree that is fed by crystalline waters flowing from the very throne of God. That is our Hope—Faith and Hope.

But how do we get there? The Tree of Love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..." If you've ever been to a circus when they set up the main tent, you would see them raise a central spar... a mighty pole, taller than all others, upon which the rest of the structure hangs. The cross of Jesus—The Tree of Suffering—the Tree of Love is the great giant that stands tall above the whole of human history. Everything in the past, everything in our future, finds its center, its pivot point right here.

And when we gaze upon that cross—with the Creator hanging from his own creation out of love for us—we are reminded again of the Scarlet Thread. Reminded that, from the first bite of forbidden fruit—from the first moment after our parents were expelled from Paradise—God was already at work restoring all things, making all things new, bringing together that which had been separated to return us to the shade and comfort and delight and eternal bliss beneath the Tree of Life.

There's the Story: God's Story, your Story. Three trees: A Tree of Separation, a Tree of Life, a Tree of Salvation—Faith, Hope and Love. And winding from tree to tree to tree is that same Scarlet Thread of God's persistent love which binds the whole story together. So for one final reminder before we close this book, I invite you to listen with wonder to the many ways that Jesus, the Savior, has revealed himself to us throughout these pages.

Jesus throughout the Bible

In Genesis, Jesus Christ is the seed of the woman.
In Exodus, He is the Passover Lamb.
In Leviticus, He's our High Priest.
In Numbers, He's the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.
In Deuteronomy, He is the prophet like unto Moses.
In Joshua, He is the captain of our salvation.
In Judges, He is our judge and lawgiver.
In Ruth, He is our kinsmen-redeemer.
In 1st & 2nd Samuel, He is our trusted prophet.
In Kings and Chronicles, He is our reigning king.
In Ezra and Nehemiah, He is the rebuilders of broken down walls of human life.
In Esther, He's our Mordecai.
In Job, He is our ever living redeemer.
In Psalms, He is our shepherd.
In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, He is our wisdom.
In Song of Solomon, He is our loving bridegroom.
In Isaiah, He's the Prince of Peace.
In Jeremiah, He is our Righteous Branch.
In Lamentations, He's our weeping prophet.
In Ezekiel, He's the wonderful four-faced man.
In Daniel, He's the fourth man in life's fiery furnace.
In Hosea, He is the faithful husband forever married to the backslider.
In Joel, He's the baptizer of the Holy Ghost and fire.
In Amos, He's our burden bearer.
In Obadiah, He is mighty to save.
In Jonah, He is our great foreign missionary.
In Micah, He's the messenger of beautiful feet.
In Nahum, He's the avenger of God's way.
In Habakkuk, He is God's evangelist crying, "Revive thy works in the midst of the years."
In Zephaniah, He's our savior.
In Haggai, He's the restorer of God's lost heritage.
In Zechariah, He's the fountain opened up in the house of David for sin and uncleanness.
In Malachi, He is the son of righteousness rising with healing in His wings.

In Matthew, He's the King of the Jews
In Mark, He's the servant
In Luke He is the Son of Man, feeling what you feel.
In John, He is the Son of God
In Acts, He's the savior of the world
In Romans, He's the righteousness of God.

In 1st Corinthians, He's the father of Israel
In 2nd Corinthians, He is the triumphant one, giving victory.
In Galatians, He is your liberty. He sets you free.
In Ephesians, He's the head of the Church.
In Philippians, He is your joy.
In Colossians, He is your completeness.
In 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, He is your hope.
In 1st Timothy, He is your faith.
In 2nd Timothy, He is your stability.
In Titus, He is truth.
In Philemon, He's your benefactor.
In Hebrews, He is your perfection.
In James, He's the power behind your faith.
In 1st Peter, He is your example.
In 2nd Peter, He is your purity.
In 1st John, He is your life.
In 2nd John, He is your pattern.
In 3rd John, He is your motivation.
In Jude, He is the foundation of your faith.
In Revelation, He is your coming king.
He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end.
He is the keeper of creation, the creator of all.
He's the architect of the universe and the manager of all times.
He always was, He always is, and He always will be.
Unmoved, unchanged, undefeated, and never undone.
He was bruised and brought healing; He was pierced and eased pain.
He was persecuted and brought freedom. He was dead and brought life.
He is risen and brings power. He reigns and brings peace.
The world can't understand Him. The armies can't defeat Him.
Schools can't explain Him and the leaders can't ignore Him.
Herod couldn't kill Him. The Pharisees couldn't confuse Him.
The people couldn't hold him. Nero couldn't crush Him.
Hitler couldn't silence Him. The New Age can't replace Him.
He is life, love, longevity, and Lord.
He is goodness, kindness, gentleness, and God.
He is holy, righteous, mighty, powerful, pure.
His ways are right, His words eternal.
His will is unchanging and His mind is on me.
He is my redeemer. He is my savior.
He is my guide. He is my peace.
He is my joy. He is my comfort.
He is my Lord and He rules my life.

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