

Seeing God in the Completed Story

by Tim King , Jan 20, 2005

Robert McCheyne says, “Live near to God, and so all things will appear to you little in comparison with eternal realities.” I guess that is why I like to read the narrative of Scripture. When observing the biblical story as a whole, we find the power for living in the story of the gospel. In turn, the stuff of life is put into its own small place, quietly receding into the shadows of *the greatest story ever told*.

Unlike the impression we might get from attending any number of churches today, this story does not begin and end within the confines of the New Testament writings. As I like to say, it goes from Genesis through Maps!

The capstone, of course, is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (not just the book, but the personhood and *presence* of God).

Early on in the Book of Genesis, almost immediately, we are introduced to the main character. His name is God. We are told that he is the Creator of all that exists. As the story unfolds, we see that this Creator desires to have fellowship with his creation, and he wants his creation to have fellowship with him and with each other.

After placing his creation—a man and woman—in a perfect garden setting, the Creator introduces a command, a law. They should not eat of a certain tree in the garden.

Soon, both eat of the tree’s fruit. Immediately their consciences awake. These awakened consciences are the point of the story. Once awakened, the possibility for true life and relationship now exists...and so does its decline.

Their grasp for independence brings to light an awareness of their distance from—and yearning for—a close fellowship with their Creator. But without his intervention, this will not be possible.

Desperate and at a loss for what to do, the creation struggles to cover itself. As God walks in the garden, his people, armed with their new-found knowledge of being separate, hide. Something is different. Something has changed. Something is terribly wrong.

Soon we learn that the sin of the people mirrors their failure to rise to the ultimate level of fellowship that God always had intended for them. The problem of their transgression against the garden law must be dealt with if they are to fulfill what is now their innermost desire—to achieve deep fellowship with God for which their awakened consciences now yearn.

Even so, the tension of the story builds as we learn that there is no provision for their transgression—no way for them to elevate themselves to the status of God’s original desire and intent. After their breach of garden etiquette, they can “hear” God in the garden, but they evidently do not “see” him. Poetically, it seems the writer is trying to tell us something as he ventures forward by weaving this theme throughout the entire plot.

As we read more of the story, we gain additional insight about God. We learn that he is not confined to time and space as is his creation. He is everywhere present at once. We are told that this Creator,

this infinite Being, can never be “seen” physically by a finite creation; the very boundlessness of his essence makes this impossible. Even so, his concern for his creation produces a presence that *can* be seen in his ‘actions’ and the ‘words’ spoken through his servants. Such was the case with a servant named Moses.

Putting Moses in His Place

Moses enters the scene when the people of the Creator are enslaved in a land called Egypt, desperately seeking release from their bondage and captivity. God calls Moses to lead them out of their oppression and into a land of promised rest. As with the metaphor of *sight*, so too, the metaphor of *rest* will prove an important theme of the story.

It is soon discovered that, though the people may be delivered from their captors, freeing them from the bondage of their own independence will not be so easy. The harder they try, the more evident their weakness. It seems that since the transgression of their original ancestors in the garden, reversing the cycle of sin and rebellion against God is not humanly possible.

In the process of this deliverance from Egyptian bondage, Moses makes a request to “see” God. Since this is not possible, all that Moses is allowed to see is represented by the concept of the “back” of God. In short, God is going somewhere, and at this point, Moses needs only to follow.

Through a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, Moses and the people follow God. Each day God provides for the needs of the people and his saving actions are evident to all. However, the story makes clear that though God is present, he also is being increasingly ignored. Soon, the Creator is forgotten.

Because of their spirit of independence, the people of God no longer choose to see or recognize him in their midst. Although God provides additional instructions so his people can continue to see him and remain in fellowship with him, sadly the people insist on their own way, the way of independence. The consequences are deadly. The fellowship between God and mankind is lost.

Exile and Return

From here the story takes us through many years of God reaching out to his people, their return, followed by their obstinacy and refusal to see him in their midst. The cycle continues to repeat itself until it is obvious that something further must be done to bring about God’s plan to restore the broken fellowship and help his creation reach his intended goal.

The story relays to us that if God is to accomplish his desires, he will have to provide a clearer way for his creation to see him in all of his goodness and love. As unbelievable as it seems, God decides he must reveal himself to his creation by becoming like them; he must come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth if he is to break the repetitive cycle of the garden.

The plan of God is so stunningly ‘other than’ that no one can expect it to unfold as it does. In Jesus the story models for us what it is to walk in perfect unity with God the Father. In this sense Jesus embraces the divine within, allowing him to walk in complete dependence upon the Father while also remaining in fellowship with the Father’s creation.

Jesus explains that through him the creation may see God. But, once again, the creation chooses to

live independent of the Creator's call and falls into the same struggle as their garden ancestors of long ago. Rejected and crucified, the earthly ministry of Jesus is complete. His resurrection and ascension, we are told, prepares the way for the final revealing of God and the ultimate fellowship with humanity that served as his intended goal from before the foundation of the world (Titus 1:2).

And so, according to the traditional telling of the story, the world waits. For some twenty-one centuries and counting... it waits. What comes next is really almost anyone's guess. The theories and the supposed endings of the story differ wildly. Some are more constructive than others as they traverse the path to the 'end,' but ultimately, all of them terminate in some form of cataclysmic intervention by God. Even so, for some twenty-one centuries and counting... we wait.

Is That Really The Story?

If this is the way the story goes, especially *after* the cross and resurrection of Jesus, what are we missing? Evidently, according to the story as customarily told to this point—we have yet to “see” God.

If Jesus has not yet returned to consummate the plan of God with his creation, the glory of God has not been revealed, our promised salvation is postponed for another time, and the glory intended for us by God has yet to be manifested.

Even more disconcerting, why would anyone think that passing from this dimension to the next would produce a greater walk with or sight of God? Remember, traditionally understood, the story is on hold awaiting the final outcome, which, if that is the case, denies us entrance into the heaven which so many desire. (See the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation. The ‘place of the dead’ is emptied *only* at the return of Christ).

Disturbing, isn't it? Something seems skewed, out of sorts, postponed to our detriment. The wisdom writer acknowledged that “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12). If the story's ending has been delayed by 2,000 years, we have been left with deferred hope and sick hearts. Where is the “tree of life”?

A Story Fulfilled

As I read the story of Jesus, I see that most of the time, if not always, his audience just didn't ‘get it’—they didn't get *him*. He teaches that the kingdom they are seeking does not come with observation (Luke 17:20). They shouldn't expect something matching the physical nature of their existence. He would deliver something of a much higher order.

So, what do they do? They go ahead with their own plans and try to make him king!

Jesus attempted to communicate the story in another way. Following the lead of the Old Testament prophets, he gives them a good lesson in the poetic style of metaphor (John 6). He tells them that having true fellowship with God will require that they not only ‘get’ Jesus, ‘get’ his teaching of a higher order of living, but that they will have to *consume* him. The metaphorical words he used were something more akin to “eat my flesh and drink my blood.”

They still didn't get it. They didn't see the story. The message seemed beyond them. When Jesus spoke of an eternal relationship, they could only see, ‘If he can give us bread today, then he should

be good for it tomorrow also.’

When I read this part of the story, I see a principle standing out in stellar relief. It says to me if *they* could *hear* the words of Jesus and not get it, is it possible that *I’ve* been *reading* the words of Jesus and haven’t gotten it either?

Perhaps it is time to take another look—a look through the metaphorical lens of not only Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, but of other New Testament writers as well.

Let’s take a brief look at three texts—2 Corinthians 3:7-18, Galatians 4:21-31, and Revelation 21-22—to see if we can get a bit of a different understanding of the story. One that does *not* give us deferred hope and sick hearts, but *hope fulfilled and a tree of life*.

Poetic Imagery and Metaphor

All good poetic imagery and metaphor has a ‘concrete referent’ to which it points. In other words, the language is looking at something real, solid, concrete.

For instance, in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 we join the story in transition. The law system administered through Moses (the concrete referent) was given by God and therefore was *glorious* (glorious is a great word, rich with meaning). However, it was in the process of passing away (twenty-one centuries ago) and giving ground to the “more glorious” administration of Christ.

But why was something glorious passing away? We like glorious. Glorious is good.

It is because Paul (who communicates this in grand poetic style) says that God has something better than good. He is going to trump the glorious with something “more glorious.” And, according to the story, this transition was already underway.

In this transition, Paul demonstrates that the difference between Moses and Christ, between ‘glorious’ versus ‘more glorious’, is as distinct as viewing the presence of God through a veil versus seeing him face-to-face. (Think ‘relationship’ here, like a map pointing to a higher truth, not visual as in photograph. Remain with the way Jesus chose to tell the story...the one with the ‘higher’ order, nature and truth).

The way Paul tells it, the story portrays the creation being made in the image of the Creator, coming face to face with the divine image, being changed from death to life, from sinfulness into sinlessness, from glorious into something more glorious. Paul’s rich style of the language tells us that through the work of Christ they at that time were coming into the fullness and likeness of the Father. The transgression of Eden was currently being overturned. The renewed relationship was taking place before their eyes.

Don’t miss this point: That renewed relationship, according to the story, *was being fulfilled in their day* and was never meant to be postponed for a conclusion some twenty-one centuries later and counting. Such a version of the story would have been totally counter to the way Paul and the other New Testament writers understood and proclaimed it to be.

We see this in the story as Paul tells it in Galatians 4:21-31. Again, the language is rich with allegory and meaning has as its concrete referent the same Mosaic Law system that was under

discussion in our text above. The difference is that here Paul chooses to broaden the story to include ancestral women who give birth to children who represent two covenants which further point to two cities. This entire section is pregnant with the meaning of the story as a new relationship with God which was rising into fulfillment from what would soon be the ashes of a destroyed old Jerusalem and an imperfect way of living.

Read along as the story unfolds—Paul is quick to the point. Their ancestor Abraham had two sons. One was born of a slave woman, his name was Ishmael, and he was representative of the bondage the people of God found themselves in at that time—a bondage born of a law system that could not find the necessary power to overturn the separation event between Creator and creation which occurred in the garden long ago. This entire setting was presently being lived out in their prized and holy city, Jerusalem.

The other son was born of Abraham's wife Sarah. His name was Isaac and he was representative of the free relationship that God was intending for his creation to have with him. True to the earlier teachings of Jesus, this relationship would be built upon something more than glorious, more than physical, something that could be represented only by a new sparkling city, a New Jerusalem. But there was a stipulation to receiving such a city—the old city which represented the old system, the old way of the lower order, would have to be driven out. The story as told by Paul held true to the referent upon which it was built, for in the day of Abraham, Ishmael was cast out so that he would not be a fellow heir with Isaac.

The story as Paul is weaving it becomes clear. As Jesus once figuratively overturned tables in the temple, God was about to overturn the temple itself. The city of Jerusalem was glorious, but something was coming that was much more glorious. And it would only come when the glorious was removed, when, figuratively speaking, Ishmael was removed from the house.

Did It Come, Or Are We Still Waiting?

When we plug into the way biblical writers weave the story, especially the way Jesus himself tells it, we are caught up in the extreme momentum of its unfolding and the rate of speed at which its conclusion reaches its climax.

To arrive at the final page of this story, we turn to John the beloved, the disciple closest to Jesus, the one who perhaps knew him best and who alone, among the male followers of Jesus, dared to stand at the foot of the cross as Jesus died.

It would not be much of a stretch to conclude that the faith and courage of John forms the reason for his being given the task and privilege of writing the concluding chapters to the greatest of all stories. This seems to be the case in light of Jesus' proclamation to Peter that "if I will that John remain alive until I come, what is that to you?" (John 21:22) In any event, we find John, sometime shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem, banished to the isle of Patmos, writing the concluding lines of *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

This book is striking in the way it begins and ends. John is told to write about things which "must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1), events whose "time is near" (1:3). So urgent is this message of "soon" and "near" that John ends the book by re-emphasizing it in a repetitious manner for all to see (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). The first and last words of the final chapter in this great story are words of

unmistakable nearness.

But why? Why does John write about things that “must” shortly take place?

It all turns on the understanding held by Jesus and Paul that the time for the fulfillment of the Creator’s great promise to redeem his creation was at hand (Matthew 10:23, 16:27, 28, 24:34; Hebrews 9:28, 10:37).

True to the story as Paul tells it in Galatians 4, the old Jerusalem was about to be taken out of the way so that the new and heavenly Jerusalem could come down and be received of the saints. Accordingly, John finishes *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* with the poetic imagery of the arrival of this new city (Revelation 21, 22).

Ishmael has been cast out. The new city has come. The more glorious arrived and the garden chasm has been bridged.

Conclusion

Without the end of this story having *already* taken place, we cannot see God today as he intends for us to see him—as friend. We would have the promise and hope of salvation without actually having it complete. Even worse, we would still be in the time of captivity (see Galatians 4:21-31), waiting for the casting out of the bondwoman and her son so that the children who are free may be revealed. Is this the outcome of the cross... twenty centuries of bondage?

If the story is not complete, then in the light of what city do the people of God live—the old Jerusalem or the new? Or, if the old has been removed, yet the new has not yet arrived, has the cross of Christ produced 2,000 years of homelessness? Is that really the way the story is supposed to be told today? Is that the good news?

Victory arrived at the *conclusion* of the story when the new city appeared in its full glory. When the earthly Jerusalem and all of its attending services were taken out of the way in A.D. 70—as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24—the heavenly Jerusalem came down. Consequently, we are a victorious people because we live apart from the earthly Jerusalem, not *waiting* for the prolonged arrival of the heavenly. Again, if we think in terms of covenant fulfillment and a restored relationship with God, the fulfillment of the story is much easier to see. However, refusing to turn the final page prevents us from seeing what God has long ago revealed.

Today, we can see the presence of God as in the days of Moses—through his actions. But unlike Moses who observed the back of God leading him forward, we now are blessed to see the face of God as we have arrived (through the covenantal arrival/presence of Christ) in the land of *promised rest*.

Eternal life is ours; it is present. Through the completed work of Jesus we have been reunited with the Creator living in the light of the new city, the heavenly Jerusalem. With this last line of the book written and fulfilled, the time has not come to throw the book away or to postpone embracing its perfected message. This is a story written for the world to enjoy throughout time. Cherish the story and live in its power, for this is the reason for its writing.