

Stories: Part 4

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[0 : 00] We are looking tonight for the last time at the theme of story. Four sermons, we have looked at those four kind of big points that we see throughout scripture.

! Once upon a time, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and then we see that an enemy entered in. And thirdly, we see a rescuer came in the Lord Jesus.

And tonight we look at happily ever after. And my argument is that that is the kind of great overarching theme of the Bible. And all the stories that we tell each other are kind of pointing us.

They are hinting to us of a greater story. Someone said to me last week, it was great to be reminded of films of the 90s and the early 2000s. And I've really enjoyed studying this theme.

I think one of the things I've really enjoyed is those of you who try to take notes. And so those of you who normally take notes of my structured sermons, realizing that there's not much structure and there's lots of thoughts. And the notebook shuts.

[1 : 05] And about ten minutes later, the Bible shuts. But I think it's been helpful. It's been helpful to me to preach in a different way. And I hope it's been helpful to you. Next week we start Jeremiah.

Alright. They lived happily ever after. Happily ever after. Wouldn't it be wonderful if that was true? They lived happily ever after.

They are some of the most beautiful and haunting words that have ever been spoken. Why does the end of a great story leave us with a lump in our throat?

Why does the end of a TV series that you leave, you finish, leave you kind of longing for more? And if we've not become entirely cynical, some of the best endings in films and in books and in TV series leave us in tears, don't they?

Why is that? Well, I've been arguing because God has set eternity in our hearts. Every story that we tell is an attempt to put into words and images what God has written in our hearts.

[2 : 16] Remember how the Chronicles of Narnia end. Then Aslan turned to them and said, You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be. Lucy said, We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan.

And you've 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 has 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 that I cannot write them.

And for us, this is the end of all the stories. And we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story.

[3 : 25] 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 no one on earth has read.

Which goes on forever. In which every chapter is better than the one before. It is magnificent writing. It is even better theology. There is a longing in the human heart for the happy ever after. And so firstly, every story has an ending. Every story, including yours, has an ending. I wonder if you've faced that.

Even if you get a taste of Eden in this life. If you're one of the fortunate souls that finds love and happiness in the world.

You cannot hold on to it. You know this, don't you? Your health cannot hold out forever. Age will conquer you.

[4 : 28] If you live long enough, one by one, your friends and your loved ones will slip through your hands. And your work will remain unfinished. Your time on this stage will come to an end.

Like every person gone before you, there will come a time where you will breathe your last breath. And then what? And then what?

And if that is the end of the story, it is a tragedy. But Beth was right. Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Sooner or later, life will break your heart.

Or rather, death will break your heart. Perhaps it's going to take for you to lose someone that you love. To shake you from that denial. That the final enemy is death.

It will come. Every story has an ending. Is there no way out? Do we have a future? Our enemy is a thief.

[5 : 35] And it's stolen from our hearts. The magic wonder. And the promise of a life lived happily ever after. We live in a city where very few people live with hope.

To those without faith, our enemy, the devil, has whispered, your story ends with an accident. And there's nothing really beyond this. This is as good as it gets.

There's no wonder, is it, that people drink too much. People eat too much. And they watch too much TV. And they anesthetize themselves with scrolling. And they live beyond their means.

And basically they opt out of thinking. And if they allow themselves, just for a moment, to feel the depth of their actual longing for life and love and happiness.

But they won't do that. And if they allow themselves just to think about it for a moment, they will despair. And so they don't think. So they escape.

[6 : 40] Or more than anything, they numb themselves from reality. They amuse themselves, as Neil Postman says, to death. That's what's happening. Our culture has numbed itself, isn't it?

So it doesn't have to think. Our phones distract us. We refuse to allow ourselves any silence or any space just to stop and think. When you try to drive people to the logical conclusions of their arguments, they refuse to go there.

They opt out. But what is Act 4? Act 1. Once upon a time in the beginning. Act 2. Evil enters.

Act 3. Well, the rescuer, the redeemer comes. But what is Act 4 in the Bible story? And it is Revelation 21, verse 4. Then I saw, Revelation 21, verse 1.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. Where's the echo? Where's the echo? Deja vu?

[7 : 51] Where have you heard that before? Then I saw a new heavens and a new earth. How did the Bible begin? Genesis 1, verse 1.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Revelation 21, it's a deliberate echo, isn't it? And that had been promised in the middle of the Bible.

Isaiah 65, verse 17. Behold, I will create a new heavens and a new earth. It had been promised by Isaiah. But it's been foreshadowed by the life of Jesus.

That as he walks through the Middle East 2,000 years ago, when he touched the blind, they were able to see. When he touched the deaf, they were able to hear.

When he touched the lame, they leapt up to their feet and walked and danced. And when he called back the dead, they came to life again.

[8 : 51] We see him again and again, wherever humanity was broken, Jesus restoring it. The coming of the kingdom of God.

He restores the world that he made. He gives us a trailer of what will one day be. And God whispers this into the very warp and woof of creation.

He speaks to us through creation of this. Think of the creation that we enjoy. Think of the dead of winter.

Winter is great, isn't it, for about a week and a half. But if it was always winter, you know you get what January was like this year? It was unbearable, wasn't it? It went on for months, it seemed. So dark, so wet, so windy.

If it's also always winter, life is unbearable. Every tree lifeless. Every flower gone. The grass wet and brittle.

[9 : 50] And the world cold and silent and bleak. But spring breaks forth, doesn't it? The blossom begins to come out on the trees.

The grass begins to grow again. The daffodils appear and then the bluebells. Creation is telling us. It's what we long for. We long to leave the winter of the world behind.

And if we will listen to creation, it will point us to the great restoration. The restoration of spring and summer is pointing us precisely to what God is promising us.

To the miracle that one day he is going to make all things new. That's what he says in Revelation 21 and verse 5. He was seated on the throne and said, Behold, I am making all things new.

There's a new heavens and a new earth. And of course, this has started already. Let me read you these words.

[10:55] Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?

And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back. It was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, Do not be alarmed.

You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

But go tell his disciples and Peter that he's going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. He was crucified. He has risen. He is not here.

Those are the words which end Mark's gospel. They are the most stunning, unbelievable, happiest ending to a story you could possibly imagine.

[11:57] But it's not just a story in history. For those of us who have trusted in Christ, and are united to Christ, actually it's our story, isn't it? Because 1 Corinthians 15, verse 20 to 21 says, In fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

He said, The firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection from the dead. He is the firstfruits.

And because he has risen from the dead, you and I will rise from the dead. I get up early on a Sunday morning before the sun is up. And there's a moment, isn't there, when you're up that early, and you start to see just the first bit of light.

You see the sunlight before you see the sun. There's that first bit of sunlight, the first rays. It's not so dark as it was. What is that telling you?

It's telling you that the sun is coming up. The daytime is coming. And so it is with Jesus' resurrection. We see the light. And it's telling us that our resurrection is coming too.

[13:04] As certain as the sun will come up, when we see the first rays, as certain is our resurrection, because of Christ's resurrection. So the question is this.

Will everyone have a happy ending? Will everyone have a happy ending? Jesus told a parable to get our attention.

He actually told a story. He said the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and he sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast.

But they would not come. And so again, the king sends another servant saying, tell those who are invited, see, I've prepared my dinner, the reception's ready, my oxen and my father's calves, they've been slaughtered, everything is ready.

Come to the wedding feast. But they paid no attention. And they went off. One to his farm, another one to his business.

[14:11] The truth is, not everyone lives happily ever after. Because most people do not want the life that God offers them. And they won't come to the wedding reception.

They reject his story. And they reject him. And they reject his son. I was with a group of people recently, and they were joking around.

They were telling, they were talking about something that they'd done. And one of the people in the group said, I mean, you'll go to hell for that. They all laughed. You know what people think of when they think of things like that, isn't it?

Don't smoke, don't drink, don't have one night stands. Don't drink, don't smoke, or chew, or go with girls that do. Some of those things are sinful.

Some of those things are sinful when they're taken to excess. But that isn't really understanding what sin is. Primarily, sin is a rejection of God.

[15:21] Primarily, people are in hell tonight because they have rejected God. And they've rejected God's invitation. They have refused him, and they've rejected his son.

It is a refusal to let God be God. It is a refusal to listen to his invitation. But tonight, tonight God is patient with you.

He's patient with you. Not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. But if you say to him, no, clearly I do not want you, and I do not want your son.

And if you persist in saying no and refusing him, in the end, God gives you what you want. The biblical picture of hell is that of being outside.

It's of being outside, of being in darkness. The picture of hell is death, not life.

[16:40] The way that the Bible describes hell, the way that Jesus describes hell, is one of bitter regret. of endless separation, of being without hope, of the agony of knowing then what you should have known now, but of not being able to change your circumstances.

George MacDonald, in his book, *The Last Farthing*, said this, the man weeks from the final struggle of death in absolute loneliness. Such a loneliness as in the most miserable moment of deserted childhood he never knew.

Not a hint, not a shadow of anything outside his consciousness reaches him. All is dark, dark and dumb. No motion, not the breath of wind.

Never dream of change. not a scent from a far off field. No sign of God anywhere. God has so far withdrawn from the man he is in God's prison, his own separated self.

And I have to say to you tonight, that doesn't have to be the end of your story. It doesn't have to end like this. Stop being proud.

[18:03] Stop refusing and rejecting God. Stop making yourself the main character of the story. Take your place, rightful place, in God's story.

And you can be rescued from a lost eternity. From an eternity of regret and an eternity of sorrow and an eternity of sadness.

And it's why those who have been redeemed, it's why those who have been rescued, we cannot help but sing. It's why when we try to describe the new creation, we can't really do it.

What would it be like? It would be like feasting. It's described as the greatest party you've ever been to. It's joy unspeakable. But we also have to say we're not there yet.

That day has not yet come. And so tonight you have the invitation of life. I have set before you life and death.

[19:11] Now choose life, Moses preached to the Israelites. That is the offer of the gospel. The message of this story, choose life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus says, come to me that you may have life. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. And this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

And so the end of the Bible, Revelation 22, verse 17 says, the bride and the spirit say come and let the one who hears says come and let the one who is thirsty come.

Let the one who desires take the water of life without price. Act 4 is the happily ever after.

It's the restoration of life as it was meant to be. It's the return of the beauty and the intimacy and the adventure that you were created to enjoy and you've longed for every day of your life.

[20:20] And yet better than that it's immortal. Because once human beings stood in the garden and they knew joy and peace but they lost it.

But in the new creations we will never lose it. It cannot be taken away. Sunrise and sunset tell the tale every day remembering Eden's glory and foretelling Eden's return.

And then the king will say to those on his right come you are blessed by my father. Take your inheritance the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

And Paul tells us that the inanimate creation around us is longing for this. The trees stand on tiptoe waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

Creation which has been subject to futility which goes wrong has been subjected to futility in hope that one day creation will be set free released from its bondage to corruption and it will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[21:34] Romans 8. But we live tonight in between Acts 3 the triumph of Christ and Acts 4 the happily ever after.

we have a glorious future in Christ but this tale is not over yet. The story is not over.

I was thinking to myself I think that is the phrase that I use more than any other phrase in pastoring this church. The story is not over. So the heartache in your life the unfulfilled longings the betrayal that some of you have known the sin that you continue to struggle with the apparent failure of your life the sickness that will not go away the false accusations that you struggle with the child that has rejected the gospel and is far away the difficult marriage the separation that you feel the story is not over.

And we are living in the days of Christ's victory but we are not in the happily ever after yet. We're not home yet. Jesus said I am going to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you to be with me and in my father's house there are many rooms.

There's plenty of room in my father's house. And what will it be like in my father's house? Well God will dwell with man and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more and neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away and he was seated on the throne and said behold I am making all things new.

[23 : 55] So I've been arguing that we live in God's story in the beginning and then evil enters in and Christ comes to conquer and then finally the happily ever after.

So three things about this story for you to take with you in this week. The first thing is this things are not what they seem. Things are not what they seem.

And where would we be if Eve had recognised the serpent for who he really was? And then the carpenter of Nazareth fixing coffee tables and shelves.

He's not who he appears to be either. There's far more going on in this story than meets the eye isn't there? You live in a world of two halves.

One part that you can see and one part that you can't. And I would argue that you must live and I must live as though the unseen world is more weighty and more real and more dangerous than the part we can see because we live by faith and not by sight.

[25 : 16] This week things are not what they seem. Secondly this, we are at war. The story of the Bible is a love story. It's the greatest love story.

It's a beautiful love story but it's in the middle of a life and death battle. Just look around you. Look at the church in this country.

Look at the casualties strewn across the field. the lost souls, the broken hearts, the captives, those who fought well once but now have been wounded partly through their own fault.

And it is a war. war. And we must take this battle seriously as Christians. There is a war for the human heart. And there is a war for your heart.

And there is a war for your children's heart. And so fight. Number three, and I don't know really how to put this, but number three this week, you matter.

[26 : 35] You have a crucial role to play. It is one of the themes in films, the kind of insignificant person who has a vital role to play.

Think of Frodo in Lord of the Rings, Lucy Pevensy in Narnia, think of Wheezy in Toy Story 2. Think of all the films, there is insignificant characters that have a very important role to play.

And I think I am scared as a minister of a reformed church, and I think we are scared in church like ours of a self-esteem gospel, a gospel where we put ourselves at the centre, and it's half the truth that is.

It is a really dangerous thing to underestimate your role in the story. If you do that, you'll lose heart, you'll miss your lines. And this great story, this epic story that we take our place in, you two and I have also reached the point where we must find our courage and fight for the hearts of others, for your family.

You know the scene in the film, don't you? It could be any film, really. The hour is late, much time has been wasted, but it's not too late. And there are great things to be done, and there are great sacrifices to be made.

[27 : 56] And you won't lose heart if you really understand what is going on in God's purposes, in God's story. And you won't lose heart where this story is headed, and what your lover has promised you.

And so this week, I think it's encouraging, isn't it, going to this week with these three things. Things are not what they seem. You are at war in this love story. And you matter.

You have a crucial role to play. God has put you where you are in your circumstances for you to fight, and for you to stand, and for you to play your role, because the story's not over.
Let's pray.