

*T he S tory  
We Find  
Ourselves In*

A Series of Spiritual Conversations

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# The Story We Find Ourselves In

A Series of Spiritual Conversations  
Conversation 1

## *What's Your Story?*

### *Discuss Your Story*

- Have there been times in your life when you felt you were part of something larger?
- Have you ever considered how your life story fits in with “the big picture”?
- How would you describe your relationship with the author of your story, God—dating, happily married, separated or divorced?

### *Read About God's Story*

Everyone has a story—their life story. But we often fail to see that **our own stories are part of a much larger story**. We are all part of something larger. Our lives are chapters in a greater novel. **Our stories only make sense when they are seen in light of God's story**. The Bible is the record of this story. It shows us how our stories are woven together with God's. Spiritually, you will truly find yourself, discover who you really are, through God's story.

This series of spiritual conversations is intended to help you grasp a “box-top” view of the Bible. If God's story is a puzzle, it's hard to make sense of it without the box-top—the picture on the top of the box that shows how all the pieces fit together. This series is not a substitute for reading the Bible itself. But it can help you gain a bird's eye view of God's story.

God's story is a story about **community**, and **conversation is the heartbeat of community**. Therefore, we urge you to ask a friend or group of friends to join you in conversation and dialogue about this material. Meet together five or six times over coffee or bottled water and share and listen to each other's stories as you cover this material. Take up one or two of the conversations below each time you meet.

**The Bible is the story of God's mission to create an authentic community that would bind humans to humans and all humans to God.**

His dream was **a community without racial, gender or economic barriers, and where all—from the powerful to the powerless and from the impoverished to the influential—would be loved and respected, represented and protected by God and by each other.**

This story is told in **two parts**, called "**The Old Testament**" and "**The New Testament**." The Old Testament is comprised of 39 books. They are summarized in the following conversations under three headings: **Creation, Conflict** and **Covenant**. The New Testament is comprised of 27 books. They are also summarized below under three headings: **Christ, Church** and **Completion**.

### *Discuss God's Story*

- What role do you want to play in God's story?
- Have you ever read or owned the Bible? What is your attitude toward it?

# The Story We Find Ourselves In

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Conversation 2

*Creation - Community is Created*  
*Genesis 1 - 3*

## Discuss Your Story

- What is your favorite part of creation?
- When have you experienced a longing for God?
- What do you believe about the origin of the universe, earth and humanity?

## Read About God's Story

Behind all that exists, including you, is a **perfect, powerful, and personal Designer**—God. This designer created the cosmos, his work of art, as a reflection of his eternal power and divine nature.

One expression of God's power and nature in creation is **creation's own ability to create**. The earth produces vegetation. Animals produce other animals. God releases his creative ability and gives the world the freedom to continue recreating itself.

Out of the ultimate community he enjoyed as Father, Son and Spirit, God crowned the cosmos with a masterpiece—us. He did this so that we might join his divine family. Just as husband and wife decide to conceive a child so that the child may share in their love, so also **God created us to share in his love**. Created in God's image, **we are "hardwired" to experience intimacy with God and with each other**.

Humanity also bears the image of its Creator through the **responsibility** God gives it for the world. God gives humans status as “junior partners” in the creation enterprise. They are to rule over and care for what God has made. Further, like the rest of creation, humanity has creative capabilities as well—in reproduction, in the arts, and in technology, to name a few.

In the Garden of Eden, the original “paradise,” this community takes shape as God interacts directly with Adam and Eve who live in innocent intimacy with one another and with the cosmos. Life is very, very good.

Read **Genesis 1:1-2:3**.

### *Discuss God's Story*

- What is the significance of a personal God who creates the universe (as opposed to an impersonal one)?
- What kind of text is Genesis 1: history, science, poem, something else? How might the text's genre affect how we understand what is going on in it?
- What questions about God's story or your story does this text raise for you? What answers does it provide?
- What would be different about your story if the words you just read are true?
- How does it make you feel to hear that God made you in his image, to enjoy real community with him and with others?
- What does this text imply about humanity's relationship to the natural world?

# *The Story We Find Ourselves In*

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Conversation 3

*Conflict - Community is Threatened*  
*Genesis 3 - 11*

## *Discuss Your Story*

- Where do you think evil comes from?
- Have you ever experienced hatred or selfishness in your heart that seemed inexplicable?
- How have you experienced evil and broken relationships?
- When have you sensed the presence of dark spiritual forces?

## *Read About God's Story*

Sadly, **we betrayed our Creator and lived contrary to his design.** Rather than being dependent upon God as the source of life, we began to live independently from him. We thus invited **death and destruction** into the world.

“Paradise” in the Garden of Eden was lost as the prideful corruption of the human heart and the influence of dark spiritual forces led Adam and Eve to reject God and mistreat each other.

**This rift in our community with each other and with God becomes the fundamental human predicament in the Bible.**

God summarizes the rift in one word: “**sin**”. Sin mars both the cosmos and us. Not even the flood can wash it away.

Liberation, or salvation, from sin will require three things: an initiative by God to restore community, the re-creation of our hearts so that we will no longer break relationships with God and with others, and the defeat of the dark spiritual forces that often undermine our community with each other and with God.

At the same time, the sin of the garden reveals a fascinating feature of humanity designed by God: **freedom**. Adam and Eve have the choice to live independently from God. They are not robots. God does not force them to behave exactly as he wants.

Therefore, the conflict of the garden represents not only a fall from ideal community with God but also the **beginnings of a more mature relationship with God**. Humans leave the infancy and innocence of “paradise” on a path toward adult faith, where choices are genuinely made to remain in community with God.

Read **Genesis 2:4-3:24**.

### Discuss God's Story

- Why would God create humans with the ability to disobey Him?
- What happens to the relationship between Adam and Eve, and between them and God, when they sin?
- Are the death and destruction that followed the first sins of the garden worth the risk God takes to have genuine relationship with us? Why or why not?
- What is the significance of the serpent in this story?
- If God's story in this text is true, what impact does it have on your story?

# The Story We Find Ourselves In

A Series of Spiritual Conversations  
Conversation 4

*Covenant - Community is Rescued*  
*Genesis 12 - Malachi*

## Discuss Your Story

- What do you know about the Old Testament? What is your impression of it?

## Read About God's Story

In the midst of this crisis, God mercifully intervenes by choosing a family and making a **covenant** (agreement) with them. Through Abraham and his descendants, God promises to bring the blessing of community to all people. He will not abandon us.

The immediate fulfillment of this promise is found in God's creation of a nation through Abraham's children that models authentic community—the nation of Israel. The remainder of the Old Testament relays the life and history of Israel.

The Old Testament can be summarized by three words: **covenant**, **code**, and **cost**.

Read **Genesis 12:1-3**.

## Discuss God's Story - Covenant

- How does it make you feel to read this story of a God who would not abandon us but would use one family to restore community on the earth?
- What does it mean to “bless or to be “blessed”?

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*Read About God's Story*

Through Moses, God gave his covenant community Israel a *code* for living, which, if followed, would empower them to live rightly with God and with all others. This code is summarized in the Ten Commandments; the commandment to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength; and the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Read **Exodus 20:1-17** (see also **Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18**).

*Discuss God's Story - Code*

- What would change in your relationships with God and other people if you followed this *code*?

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*Read About God's Story*

Through the priests, God devised a way for the *cost* of humanity's rebellion to be paid. Animals would be sacrificed to atone for the deadly division humans had caused between them and God and between themselves.

Read **Leviticus 16:1-34; 19:1-2**.

*Discuss God's Story - Cost*

- When you think of God being "holy", what does that mean to you?
- How does it make you feel that God would require sacrifices to take care of sin? What does it say about God's nature?

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*Read About God's Story*

Through kings like David, God established a kingdom which the kings of Israel, guided by the prophets, would create an earthly dynasty of righteousness and justice where all people would be invited into relationship with God and with one another. This kingdom would be a light to all other nations.

Sadly, many of the kings failed in their leadership; the kingdom repeatedly abandoned its code and abused the sacrificial system. Israel fell away from God again and again. In the end, God allowed the kingdom to be over-run by other nations.

Yet, despite the gloomy circumstances, prophets encouraged Israel with hopeful promises that God would continue his pursuit of community with the world.

Read **2 Samuel 7:8-9** (see also **Hosea 11:1-11**, **Amos 9:11-15**).

*Discuss God's Story*

- What does this text say about God? About the kind of person that pleases him?
- Conflict between God and humanity has continued through this episode of the story. What should God do next?

# *The Story We Find Ourselves In*

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Conversation 5

*Christ - Community is Embodied*  
*Matthew - John*

## *Discuss Your Story*

- What do you believe about Jesus? What have you heard about Jesus?
- What makes Jesus special or unique to you?

## *Read About God's Story*

Mary, the wife of Joseph—a descendant of King David and of Abraham, gave birth to a son named Jesus. In his human nature as a descendant of Abraham and David, Jesus would be the ultimate fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham (that through Abraham God would bless all nations) and of the promise made to David (that God would build a lasting kingdom through David).

In his spiritual nature, Jesus was God-in-the-flesh, God-in-person. This sets him apart from any other great spiritual leader. He is the only spiritual leader to be truly human and truly divine. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of true community with God.

God would no longer simply act through a human family (Abraham's) or through human representatives (like David) to renew community on earth—God would come himself. Through Jesus, God lived among us as the king of a new kingdom, the priest of a deeper code and the prophet of a world-changing message.

Read [John 1:1-18](#) (see also [John 14:1-10](#)).

*Discuss God's Story*

- What does John say about Jesus?
  - If you fully accepted John's claims about Jesus, how would your life change?
- .....

*Read About God's Story*

In his life, Jesus came as a servant and lover of all. He healed the sick, relieved the poor and forgave the weak. Jesus' kingdom was punctuated by a deeper **code** which he lived out perfectly.

Read **Matthew 5:1-7:29** (see also **Luke 4:14-21**).

*Discuss God's Story*

- How would your life be different if it was lived by Jesus' teaching and example?
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*Read About God's Story*

In his death, Jesus submitted himself to execution on a **cross**. Through his crucifixion, he showed the depths of God's love and became the ultimate sacrifice for sins. He offered forgiveness through his death more completely than any animal sacrifice ever could. All of the punishment earned by the crimes we perpetrated against each other and against God was served in one deadly blow against Jesus on the cross. Jesus is the only great spiritual leader in history to substitute himself completely on our behalf.

Read **Mark 14:32-15:47**; **1 Peter 2:23-24** (see also **2 Corinthians 5:14-21**; **Philippians 2:1-11**).

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*Discuss God's Story*

- What has been your most painful experience with death?
- How does the death of Jesus speak to your painful experiences with death?
- If these verses are true, and Jesus died for your sins, what does it mean for your life?

*Read About God's Story*

In his resurrection from the dead, Jesus paves the way through death to heaven for all of us. He is the only great spiritual leader to break the bonds of death. The bodies of all other spiritual leaders still lie in their tombs. In defeating death, Jesus was also crowned king over all spiritual forces, including those dark forces that had so frustrated God's attempts at community. Though these forces still exist, Jesus' power over them now is absolute.

Read [John 20:1-31](#) (see also [1 Corinthians 15:20-28](#); [Colossians 1:15-20](#); [Colossians 2:13-15](#)).

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*Discuss Your Story*

- If you accept these claims that Jesus was raised, how would they impact the way you view death? Jesus?

# The Story We Find Ourselves In

A Series of Spiritual Conversations  
Conversation 6

*Church - Community on a Mission*  
*Matthew - Jude*

## Discuss Your Story

- Has your experience with church in the past been good or bad? Explain.
- Would you consider being part of a church? Why? Why not?

## Read About God's Story

The followers of Jesus, collectively called the **church**, would take up where the Old Testament king and kingdom left off. Not existing for themselves but for the world, the church would demonstrate to the world what it means to love God and love neighbor. The church would consist of imperfect people, just as Israel had; but Jesus promised to be with them.

The church would be **the embodiment of Jesus' code and the kingdom Jesus inaugurated**. They would stand as a shining light to the nations of dependence upon God and justice to all regardless of race, gender or economic status.

**Through the church, the body of Jesus, Jesus would continue his mission** of drawing all people into community with God and with each other, and of bringing God's blessing to all nations.

Read **Acts 2:42-47** (see also **Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31**).

### Discuss God's Story

- In what ways is this text different from the way you've understood "church"?



### Read About God's Story

Upon his resurrection, Jesus sent the **Holy Spirit**, whom he called a **Counselor**, to live within his followers. That Spirit would be **God's presence and power within each follower of Jesus, changing them from the inside out**. The Counselor would help imperfect followers of Christ to love God and love each other in the way God originally created us to do.

This same Counselor would grant members of the church talents for preaching, serving, healing, and administering—providing every follower a way to contribute to God's mission on earth. Only in Christianity does God come to live within each of us to recreate us and to empower us to participate in His mission in the world.

Acts tells the story of the early church. Many of the Epistles, or letters, were written by apostles and others like Paul, Peter, and John to guide the church in their community-expanding mission. This is also the episode of the story in which we now find ourselves.

Read **Galatians 5:16-26** (see also **John 14:15-26; John 16:7-11; Romans 7:14-8:17**).

### Discuss God's Story

- Which of these "fruit" have you had the most difficulty with?
- How does it feel to know that God is willing to live inside you to help you grow this "fruit" in your life and in the lives of others?

# The Story We Find Ourselves In

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Conversation 7

*Completion - Community Fully Realized  
Romans - Revelation*

## Discuss Your Story

- Have you ever wondered about life, “I wonder how this will all turn out?”
- What has been your answer to that question?

## Read About God's Story

One day **Jesus will return in person to right all wrongs and end all suffering**. Every person who has lived in the story will be raised to life and Jesus will judge all with perfect justice and bring to a final end the injustice and unrighteousness that have torn apart our community with each other and with God.

The story's final chapter will be written when Jesus gives his followers access to their true home where they will live in intimacy with God and with others forever, a home where there will be no pain or suffering. On the other hand, those who rejected God's purposes in their lifetime and perpetuated injustice and unrighteousness will be judged and punished in hell.

The picture of heaven painted by the Bible is of the present world purged, refined and transformed into the “new heavens and new earth”. Everything good and fulfilling about our lives in this world we'll find in heaven. Everything bad and broken about our lives we won't find in heaven. Our true home with God will be this world in which we now live, spiritually transformed beyond imagination into a suitable place for God and his creation to dwell.

God will make us new just as he makes the world new. Just as God raised Jesus, so he will resurrect us with glorious spiritual bodies. We will dwell with him in intimate community just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. Only we will already have made a never-ending choice for relationship with God over every other alternative. Ours will be a more perfect community than that of Eden. The title of this episode is “completion”, but it is only completion in the sense that the world as we know it comes to an end. This episode is just the beginning of the heavenly reality.

Even during times of violence and evil, the followers of Jesus have been sustained by their hope in this ending to the story. They believed that in the end good would win over evil and that God would prevail.

Read Revelation 21:1-8; 21:22-22:1-5 (see also Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:35-58; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

### *Discuss God's Story*

- What do these texts say to you about how this story will end?
- How do these texts compare with the way you've come to view heaven?
- How does it make you feel that those who rejected God's purposes will be punished in hell? How might the context of the greater story make sense of hell?

# The Story We Find Ourselves In

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Conversation 8

## *Conversion - Joining God's Story*

### *Discuss Your Story*

- How would you describe your closeness to God as if relationship with him were a house: are you on the street passing by God's house; on the sidewalk approaching the house; knocking on the door; or are you inside God's house enjoying the party?

### *Read About God's Story*

God's invitation is to **let his story become our story**. God urges us to join our stories to his and to take up our role in this great adventure of faith and community. God longs for each of us to live in intimacy with him and in community with others, inviting as many as we can to take part in that same community.

Each of us must decide: **Will I embrace this story or not? Will I allow God's story to become mine? What role will I play in God's story?**

The Bible indicates that three issues are critical in becoming part of God's story. **First, God calls us to have faith, or belief, or conviction, in the truth of this story**, especially as it is revealed in Jesus.

Read **Ephesians 2:1-10** (see also **Romans 3:21-26; John 1:12-13; John 3:16**).

### *Discuss God's Story*

- What does it mean to be saved by grace through faith?

- Do you believe that God’s story is true? Do you have faith that Jesus is the one promised in the Old Testament, the Son of God, that his death forgives your sin, and that his resurrection clears the way for yours?
- If not, what’s keeping you from believing?

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*Read About God’s Story*

**Second, God calls us to repent.** The word “repent” merely means to turn away from one thing and turn toward something else. To repent means to turn away from living life independently of God and to turn toward living as part of God’s story.

Read **Mark 1:14-15** (see also **Acts 2:36-41**; **Acts 17:30-31**; **2 Corinthians 7:8-10**).

*Discuss God’s Story*

- If you had been there, what would Jesus be asking you to repent of?
- Are you ready to turn from living life on your own terms to living life by God’s?
- If not, what’s keeping you?

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*Read About God’s Story*

**Third, God asks us to be baptized.** Through baptism, God cleanses us of the sin that has separated us from Him and us from one another. In baptism, we connect with God’s story, especially Jesus’ story. Just as Jesus died, was buried, and was raised, so in baptism we die to living in conflict with God and with each other, are buried under water, and are raised to live in new community with God and with others. Through baptism, God fills us with the Holy Spirit who changes us from the inside out so that we can truly love God and love our neighbor.

After baptism, we live life in deeper community with God. We bear the moral fruit of the Counselor, the **Holy Spirit**. We join God in his mission by using the talents he gives us to love our neighbors. And we live in hope of the return of Christ and the resurrected life.

Read **Acts 2:36-41** and Romans 6:1-7 (see also **Colossians 2:11-12; Acts 22:6-16**).

*Discuss God's Story*

- Are you ready to be baptized?
- If not, what's keeping you?

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