

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

CONTENTS

The Plot	2
The King's Vision	2
The Gift Of Freedom	5
A Paradise Lost	9
The Family Moves South	13
Across The River	18
The Collapse	22
The Appearance Of A Great Teacher	24
Death On A Holiday	26
Unexpected Results	27
Life-Changing News	28
The Fulfillment Of The King's Vision	31
Where Do You Find That In The Bible?	32

The world is full of stories. But there is one that deserves to be told more than the rest. It's a timeless story of love and intrigue found in a collection of 66 writings known around the world as the Old and New Testaments.

Yet, because the sections of this book do not always read like a continuing story, its unfolding drama is often missed.

What follows is a retelling of that story. The imagination we've used along the way is meant to reflect conditions that are consistent with what we know about the people, places, and events of the most published and timeless book in the world—the Bible.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 1999, 2004 RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in USA

© RBC Ministries. All rights reserved.

THE PLOT

A great king appears from a mysterious past to expand his kingdom and to share his vision for a free world where citizens willingly share his life and values.

When members of the new world rebel against him, the king shows his patience. Instead of forcibly restoring order, he begins a long process of developing a relationship with those who are willing to trust him.

The king's heart is seen most clearly when he disguises himself as a servant and, at great personal cost, goes to the rescue of those who have fallen under the control of an evil rebel leader.

Although the king secures the ultimate safety and happiness of his citizens, the battle for their hearts and minds goes on.

THE KING'S VISION

Long ago, before dinosaurs roamed the earth, and before lakes of oil pooled below the ocean floor, there was a great king.

No one knows where this king came from, or what he did before giving us the greatest story ever told. All we know about him began when he appeared with a vision for a free world that would share his life and happiness. What follows is his story—and ours.

BY HIS WORDS

The king's first act was to make a place for his plan to unfold. With power no one can explain, he gave a command and the universe exploded into existence. Later, as a newborn planet cooled under the cover of water

and darkness, the king said, “Let there be light,” and the darkness ran from him.¹

While most of the cosmos remained barren and empty, the king reached

down and lifted vast islands from the deep waters that covered his chosen planet. Then he transformed the dry ground into a paradise of rain forests and grasslands. He made high mountains,

***The king was great
enough to be
concerned about
the smallest
of details.***

deep valleys, and white sandy beaches. He designed environments of enormous complexity. With unending

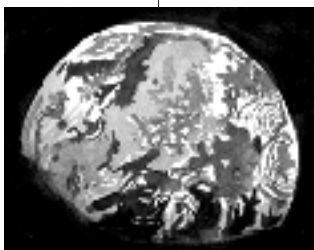
attention to detail, the king filled the earth with color,

texture, sound, and fragrance. By everything he made, he showed the breadth of his personality

and greatness.

With endless wisdom and insight he filled the air, land, and oceans with living creatures of every shape and kind. From camels to chimpanzees, from microscopic insects to giant redwood forests, the king designed an endless variety of plants and animals.

In all that he did, the king showed his ability to make something out of nothing and to bring order out of chaos. By the immensity and complexity of his universe, he showed that nothing is too large or too small to escape his attention or concern.



IN HIS LIKENESS

To put the finishing touch on all he had made, the king reached down and took a handful of clay. Under his gaze the lump of earth took shape. Then the king breathed his likeness into the form, and it became a man.²

As the man's eyes opened, the mist and soft light of first dawn filled him with wonder. Everything was new. The air was clean. The colors and fragrances were fresh and gentle.

As he walked among the trees, the king's likeness sensed that all eyes were on him. He caught the gaze of a white-tailed deer that stopped grazing to look up. He reached out to stroke the coat of a wolf that came to greet him. He laughed as a lamb pushed the wolf aside and rubbed its head against his leg.

As the man became familiar with the garden, he

grew in his admiration for the wisdom and creativity of the king. There seemed to be no end to the king's imagination and goodness.

"All of these are mine," the king said. "I'm entrusting them to you.³ Care for them and you will see how I've cared for you."

*"Care for them
and you will see
how I've cared
for you."*

BY HIS LOVE

For a while, the caretaker basked in the solitude of his work. At some point, however, he became aware of an emptiness within himself. Even though he enjoyed regular visits with the king and was surrounded by friendly birds and animals, he had no one like himself to share

the emotions of discovery and wonder.⁴

The king understood the caretaker's loneliness. But instead of taking another handful of earth, he put his likeness to sleep, removed something from around the man's heart, and from it formed a second likeness.⁵

When the caretaker woke and saw what the king had given him, he smiled. The second likeness smiled back. They were alike, but they were different. They laughed at their ability to see what the other overlooked. Before long they were enjoying together the work the king had given them to do.

These were good days for the first couple. They had a wonderful relationship with the king and with each other. On balmy evenings they all walked together among the trees the king had placed under their care.⁶

THE GIFT OF FREEDOM

The king had done so much for the couple. Everything in their garden home was a gift from him. But it was the king himself who won their hearts. He was full of surprises, but he didn't hide how he felt about them. His love and respect for the caretakers was obvious.

Even though the king could have controlled their every thought and action, he was wise. At great risk, he gave them the gift of choice. He even gave the caretakers enough space to walk away from him if they wanted to. He knew that if they couldn't leave him, neither could they choose to stay. Without freedom of choice and expression, the king's vision for a free world could not be realized.

THE TEST OF TRUST

To give the caretakers freedom, the king planted two trees in the center of the garden. One he called the tree of life. The other he described as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A central garden path forked at the trees and went off in two different directions.

According to the king, the couple could eat of all of the trees of the garden, with one exception. If they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die.⁷

The caretakers understood that the king was giving them a choice. But they weren't sure what the king meant by death. He had given them so much to enjoy. Why would he put anything off limits?

THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE

The man and woman were about to meet someone who had more problems with the king's rules than they did. Up until now, they didn't know the king had any enemies.

The one who was about to walk into their lives had not always been a rebel. In



another time and place, he too had been entrusted with honor and privilege. In the service of the king he

was known by the names of "Light Bearer" and "Son of the Morning."⁸

At some point, however, Light Bearer became inflated with self-importance. Convinced that he deserved everything he had been given, he wanted what the king had withheld. Light Bearer began to

imagine what it would be like to rule rather than to serve. He became intrigued with the thought of forming his own kingdom. When he finally decided to leave, he didn't go quietly. He convinced one-third of all the king's servants to join him.⁹ That was when Light Bearer became known as "the prince of darkness."

In the days that followed, the rebel and his followers wandered the universe looking for a place to call

*With a plan
as dark as the
night sky, the rebel
entered the garden
in disguise.*

their own. Along the way, they heard about the king's caretakers and the garden home he had given them.

With a plan as dark as

the night sky, the rebel entered the garden in disguise. With a charm that concealed his motives, he drew the woman into a conversation.

THE TURNING POINT

With a well-timed question, the rebel set his trap. "Is what I've heard true? Has the king denied you access to every part of your own home?" At first the woman defended the king.¹⁰ But then, as she looked at the creature, she found herself having thoughts that had never occurred to her. "Why would the king say no to us about anything? What doesn't he want us to know?"

The questions kept coming. Was the king holding out on them? Did he warn them about the path marked by the tree of forbidden knowledge only because he didn't want

them to know as much as he did?

Having doubts about their creator was a new experience for the woman. She had often talked with her partner about the wisdom of the king.

Together they wondered where he had come from and how he could know so much about everything. Their own relationship had deepened as the king shared more of himself with them.

Now, however, all that they had learned didn't seem to be enough. What happened next was a turning point they would never forget.

The woman started down the forbidden path and motioned for her partner to follow.

For a moment, the first caretaker paused. He remembered hearing the king describe what would happen if they ever took this path. He remembered

hearing both love and concern in the king's voice.

The man could hear his heart pounding. He felt caught and torn between his partner, the king, and his own curiosity.

*The woman
started down
the forbidden path
and motioned
for her partner
to follow.*

As the couple started down the path together, it was as if they had taken a powerful drug. Their minds were altered. Their innocence was gone. They felt exposed and vulnerable. With the tree of the knowledge of good and evil behind them, they grabbed leaves from the garden and sewed them together to cover themselves.¹¹

A PARADISE LOST

In their loss of innocence, the caretakers changed in ways they could not have anticipated. For the first time they didn't want to see the king. Suddenly they felt a need to cover themselves and hide. Never before had they blamed each other for anything. In the hours that followed, they learned the meaning of fear.

When the king found the couple, he gently pressed them for answers.¹² Why were they hiding? Who told them they needed to cover themselves? Had they taken the path he told them to avoid? The caretakers were caught. But they were not ready to accept responsibility for what they had done. The man blamed the woman. The woman blamed the rebel.¹³ And though the rebel didn't speak, there was contempt for the king in his eyes.

The caretakers were confused and frightened. A few hours earlier they had enjoyed affection for each other and the king. Now they were afraid.

Although the king wanted to forgive the couple for their failure to trust him, he didn't ignore the results of their choices. He could not allow them to remain in their

*The caretakers
were caught.
But they were not
ready to accept
responsibility
for what they
had done.*

garden home.¹⁴ If he gave them access to the tree of life now, they would reverse the aging and dying process that had already begun. With unlimited time and freedom, the caretakers

could become increasingly self-absorbed and alienated not only from the king but from each other as well. So that they would not live forever in their altered states, the king removed them from the garden.

Outside the garden, the king continued to provide for the couple. But the relationship had changed. The caretakers no longer trusted the king as they once had.

THE LEGACY OF A CHOICE

Even though the king stayed close to the first family, trouble stalked them. As the caretakers tried to rebuild their lives outside the garden, their firstborn son broke their hearts. In a moment of anger, he resisted the gentle counsel of the king. Then in a fit of blind rage, he killed his younger brother.¹⁵

Their lives would never

be the same again. There was no turning back. The knowledge of good and evil had become more than a mysterious tree of freedom. It had become a legacy of regret and loss.

The son became a fugitive. Unable to live with his parents' grief, he became a rootless wanderer. Always on the move, never at rest, he could not escape the memory of what he had done, and who he had become.¹⁶

In time, more sons and daughters were born to the first couple. Children of the caretakers multiplied with an ever-diminishing knowledge of the king.

Around watering holes and campfires, older members of the family told stories about the great king. But most of the children were more interested in the present than the past. The willingness of each new generation to live and die

without regard for the king became as repetitive as the rising and setting of the sun.

Even after a catastrophic flood wiped out most of the earth's caretakers,¹⁷ the children of the survivors continued to declare their right of self-rule.

Those who were true to the king remained few in number and inconsistent in character.¹⁸

As the king's citizens drifted from his values and vision, his likeness in them became more

difficult to see. The strong oppressed the weak. Family disputes increased. Bad blood caused family members to put distance between themselves.

Leaders became alarmed. To reverse the trends that were driving them apart, the family needed a plan that

would pull them together.

A vision emerged. The family would build a city big enough to keep the children from moving away. With a city center that touched the clouds, all who saw it would be proud of their

achievement.¹⁹

Everyone who walked its streets would be inspired by the endless pride and possibilities of human cooperation.

But the builders had forgotten the vision of the



king.²⁰ As a new day broke, there was confusion on the construction site.

Communication was disrupted. Members of the same family could talk among themselves, but they couldn't understand anyone from another clan. Within hours, all work on the great

city came to a standstill. Before long, caravans kicked up dust in all directions as each language group went looking for a place to call their own.²¹

THE KING'S PLAN

Even with the loss of their own dream, most of the family didn't recall the vision of the king. They talked about what had gone wrong and why they weren't able to live together in peace. But they didn't have a place in their heart for a free world where everyone shared the values of the great king and helped one another the way he cared for them.

So the king took a new approach. He introduced himself to a 75-year-old caretaker and made a proposal: "Leave your home and follow me. I'll give you a new homeland, many children, and a legacy of my love for all the families of the earth."²²

The old man and his wife had lived for many years without being able to have a child. Both had long since given up hope of having a son or daughter of their own. Their childlessness must have been a painful subject—especially since the caretaker's name meant "exalted father."

*The king
repeated his
assurance to the
caretaker that
through his
children the world
would find hope.*

So they waited. But for almost 25 years the couple's promised offspring never came. The king eventually repeated his assurance to the caretaker that through his children the world

would find hope. He even gave the old man a new name that meant “father of many.”²³

Then, when the man was 100 years old and his wife was 90, the impossible happened. The old woman gave birth to a son. His birth was so amazing and brought them so much joy that his name, which meant “laughter,” was a perfect fit.²⁴

THE KING'S FAMILY

Within two generations the family had become a clan of 12 sons, their wives, and many children. Even though they were still a small family by comparison to the families of other caretakers, the children of a “childless old couple” had become a family of destiny. In the years that followed, the king unfolded his plan to use this chosen family to reveal himself to all the families of the earth.

THE FAMILY MOVES SOUTH

The early years of the family were fairly normal. Other than some family arguments and fights with the neighbors, the most significant event occurred when about 70 members of the clan left home and traveled south looking for food during a severe drought.²⁵

Because the great king worked behind the scenes to prepare the way for them, the family found refuge and favor among southern neighbors. The prince of the south not only gave them food but land to plant their own crops in the rich soil of a fertile river delta. Even though this southern refuge was not home, the family found conditions on the delta comfortable. There they built homes, raised

their children, and harvested their crops.

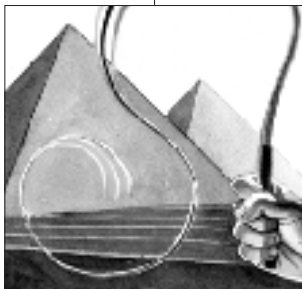
Within a few generations, however, the family's growth and ever-increasing numbers frightened the neighbors.²⁶ The prince who had done so much for them had long since passed from the scene. New leaders were concerned that they would be overrun and dominated by the family that had found refuge within their borders. So while leaders of the south still had the upper hand, they pressed the family into forced labor. By the crack and sting of the whip, tough field bosses made them work long hours under a hot sun making bricks for southern building projects.²⁷

Under growing

oppression, the family began to groan. Where was the king? He had made promises to their fathers. Why wasn't he keeping them? Rising with the dust and smoke of the brickyards, their cries grew louder and louder. Where was the king? Why had he left them alone?²⁸

A RELATIVE TO THE RESCUE

The questions stopped when a stranger walked into the brickyards. His voice



was not that of a southern neighbor. There was no whip in his hand. And his story sounded familiar to some of the

older members of the family.

According to the stranger, he was a child of the family. For 40 years he had lived as a fugitive on the other side

of the wilderness to the east. Then one day while looking after his father-in-law's sheep, the relative had heard the voice of the king. The king said he had heard the family's cries and was sending the relative to lead them out of slavery and back to a "promised land."²⁹

All eyes were on the stranger. Who did this visitor from nowhere think he was? Was he mad? Or had he really heard from the great king?

The family's questions were answered when the relative showed them powerful signs that proved the king had sent him.³⁰

To the disappointment of everyone, however, the first efforts of their new leader only made matters worse. When the relative appeared before the prince of the south, and when he quoted the great king as saying, "Let my people go," their problems multiplied.

The prince was furious and made life even more miserable for the family.³¹

In the dark days that followed, the prince of the south got more than he bargained for. The great king unleashed a series of national disasters on the prince of the south and his people. He sent plagues of flies, lice, and frogs. He polluted the national water supply and sent devastating storms and darkness.³²

Then the king planned a final act that would break the will of the prince. To keep the family safe, the king told them to kill a lamb and put its blood on the two sides and upper door frames of their homes. That night a spirit of death moved through the land. Wails of anguish could be heard in every neighborhood as the families of the south learned they had lost

their firstborn sons. But the spirit of death passed over and did not touch the homes with the blood on the door frames.³³

As their neighbors grieved, the family gathered some belongings and quickly walked out of the brickyards. When the prince regrouped and sent his armies after them, the king used his power to open up a path through a large body of water. Only when the family was safely on the other side did he release the waters to stop their pursuers.³⁴

The family was delivered in such a dramatic way that word of the great king's power soon spread through the entire region. Around watering holes in the daytime and around fires burning late into the night, the neighbors wondered out loud what would happen next with the king and his family.

A TIME FOR LEARNING

In the days that followed, the family found themselves with new problems. After a dreamlike deliverance, they woke to find themselves in a barren, no-man's land. Before long, the children were hungry. Arguments broke out all over the camp. Mothers' faces turned pale with fear. Men yelled at one another in frustration. No one could live for long in a place like this. They had not brought enough food, water, or clothing. A quick retreat back to the prince of the south seemed the only way to save the children.³⁵

Once more, however, the great king showed that he had not forgotten his family. In this forsaken place where food could not be bought and where water could not be found, the king showed his ability to provide for his people. In ways they could never have imagined, he

gave them the food and water they needed.³⁶

Later, at the foot of a mountain that burned in the king's presence and shook at the sound of his voice, he taught the family how to live with one another and with him.³⁷

The family soon learned that the king was a master teacher who used visual drama to make a point.

One often-repeated lesson stirred up many emotions. The king required the head of each household to bring a carefully selected animal to a pre-appointed place of sacrifice. Depending on what the family could afford, the owner of a lamb, goat, or bird placed his hands on the innocent creature's head and admitted his own wrongs. Then, in the king's presence, the offerer killed the animal with his own hands.³⁸

As members of the

family watched the sacrifice, the children asked a lot of questions. If the king created the

As innocent animals died, the children asked questions.

animals, why would he want them to die? What had the animals done to deserve this? How could this be fair? While parents couldn't answer all the questions, one thing was clear: The king wanted them to know that wrong choices were matters of life and death. He wanted his family to be thoughtful about what their first parents had learned under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.³⁹

The family learned the same lesson again on the

threshold of their new homeland. Scouts were sent ahead to check out the land. But when they returned they brought back a frightening report. In addition to finding plenty of food and water, they had seen strong warlords in the land.⁴⁰

The faces of the family turned pale. Eyes wet with emotion glared at their leader. What had he gotten wrong this time? What was the king doing? Had the family walked all this way under a hot sun only to die at the hands of a powerful enemy?

They had to think about the children. They couldn't raise them in a war zone. At moments like this, they wished they had never left the prince of the south. Under his fist and whip, they at least knew what to expect.

ACROSS THE RIVER

The king didn't force the family to do what they weren't ready to do. Instead of pushing his chosen people across the river and through the deep valley that lay between them and their promised land, he put them into a holding pattern. For 40 years he provided for them in a barren, hot, and windswept land. In his shadow, they wandered like a flock of sheep until the generation that didn't want to enter the land lay buried in the desert sand.⁴¹

Then, once again, the king asked his family to follow him across the river. When they arrived at the water's edge, the valley was swollen with spring floodwaters. Even though they were now close enough to see the hills of their future home across

the valley, it was clear that anyone who ventured out into those rushing waters would be swept away.

At the threshold of their new home, the king showed his people they could trust him. Just as he had once parted the waters to rescue them from the prince of the south, the king held back the waters to remind the family of his ability to lead and provide for them. By the king's power, the whole family walked to their new homeland on dry ground.⁴²

Yet, across the river, many of the old problems remained. There were still powerful warlords to be faced. The houses the king promised were already occupied, and the present owners were ready to fight to protect their property.

The king, however, was determined to evict the present occupants. According to him, they were

living on his land, ruining the environment, harming one another, and refusing to acknowledge him as king.⁴³

The days that followed were some of the best the family had ever known. Even though the king asked them to fight for their new homes, he showed them his ability to assure the outcome. In powerful ways the children could not have anticipated, he gave them houses they did not build and harvests of crops they didn't plant. The king's plan was unfolding. His people were now in a position to help the neighbors see what the great king could do for anyone who would trust him.⁴⁴

The family's new home offered more than a good quality of life. It also offered a strategic location from which to spread the king's vision. He placed them on a landbridge between three continents. The new

homeland's western border lay on the shores of a great sea. Its main roads were some of the most important commercial and military routes in the whole region. News of events that happened in the homeland quickly traveled along these trade routes in all directions of the compass.

*The new home
was at the
crossroads of
the world.*

In this new neighborhood, the king taught the family to remember him in everything they did. He taught them to work hard and to rest on every seventh day. He showed them how to trust him for the early and later

20

rains that were so necessary for a good harvest. For many years, the king taught the family to depend on him as their provider and protector.

During this period of family history, a pattern emerged. When the king's citizens trusted him, asked for his help, and lived as he told them to, they enjoyed peace and protection from their neighbors. But when they forgot about the king, became a law to themselves, and did what was right in their own eyes, they eventually found themselves overrun by enemies and grieving the loss of fathers and sons.⁴⁵

**A DESIRE
TO BE LIKE
THE NEIGHBORS**

In spite of everything the king had done for his chosen family, they kept forgetting that he had done anything at all for them.

During one such lapse of memory, the family made one of their worst mistakes. They asked the king to give them the kind of human leadership their neighbors had.⁴⁶

The family did more than ask for a strong human leader. They dismissed the king's warning that such a ruler would levy heavy taxes, use them to further his own ambitions, and draft their children into his armies to fight his wars.

But once again the king's response to the family's request showed his commitment to a free world. He gave his citizens what they asked for. He chose one of their own sons to wear the crown and even assured them that if they and their king remained faithful to him, he would continue to take care of them.⁴⁷

A POWER THAT CORRUPTED

The family's mistake soon became apparent. Over time, even the best of their monarchs was corrupted by power. Good leaders went bad, and bad rulers got worse. Leaders, who could have used their influence to help the family remain true to the great king, instead exploited the throne to build monuments and memorials for themselves.

With the corruption of the kings, so went the people. Lawlessness and violence increased. The king's vision for a free world, where everyone helped one another the way he cared for them, was ignored and forgotten.⁴⁸

A SERIES OF MESSENGERS

Even though the family forgot the king, he didn't forget them. When they wandered from him, he

called them back.⁴⁹ Through messengers who spoke on his behalf, he pleaded with his people to remember what he was planning for them. He had not lost his vision for the future. Regardless of their reluctance to trust him, he was still planning to send a leader and a deliverer who would be known as “the great king among us.”

But the king’s people didn’t want to hear about “a future day.” They were looking for immediate relief. If the king wouldn’t help them on their terms, then they would look for other leaders who would.

The king’s message remained the same. He would send his deliverer, and when the king himself lived among his people there would be peace on earth. People of

every family and nation on earth would respect and care for one another.⁵⁰

But because the family was focused on present pains and problems, the message fell on deaf ears. Family leaders used their power to silence the king’s messengers.

THE COLLAPSE

Eventually, the king’s patience was exhausted. If he didn’t intervene, more time would allow the family to multiply the violence and damage they were already inflicting on one another.



So with a deep groan, the king took down the fences of protection he had built around them. With great

sorrow, he allowed his citizens’ military defenses

to be broken down by armies from the east. Sons of the family died in battle. Survivors of the family were stripped of dignity and driven out of their promised land. Many miles away, with the sounds of a foreign language in their ears, and with the weight of another king's laws and decrees on their shoulders, the family wiped their tears.⁵¹

THE RETURN

After 70 years of exile, the family's conquerors were defeated by another ruler. A new day dawned. Exiles of war were allowed to return to their homeland.⁵² As they returned, the king himself sent messengers to assure his people that he had never stopped caring for them. These messengers promised that the king still had a vision of peace and prosperity—not only for them but for all the families of the earth.

For a while, members of the family were filled with hope. They dreamed of a time when weapons would be recycled into farming tools. They remembered that the great king had talked of a day when even nature would be at peace with itself. In that day of rest, the wolf would no longer stalk the lamb.⁵³

As time went on, the family's heart once again grew cold.

THE SILENCE

But as time went on, the family's heart once again grew cold. Memories faded. And then the voice of the great king went silent for 400 years.⁵⁴ The hope of a new day seemed lost in a series of endless nights.

THE APPEARANCE OF A GREAT TEACHER

The cry of a newborn broke the silence. History changed with the announcement of a birth. An old man looked into the face of a baby and said, “Now I can die in peace. I have seen with my own eyes what all of my life I have waited for.”⁵⁵

Nearby, an elderly woman, who for many years had given herself to the service of the great king, told all who would listen that she too had lived long enough to see the future.⁵⁶

Once again, the chosen family was filled with hope—but nothing happened. The winds of change did not blow as expected. The child who created such a commotion with his birth grew up in obscurity. While other children worked to make

a name for themselves, took wives, and began having sons and daughters of their own, he seemed content to learn the trade of his father on the backroads of one of the smallest towns in the land.⁵⁷

But when no one was looking, this young man from nowhere stepped out of the shadows to become the talk of the neighbors. Without any formal training, this teacher began challenging the most educated men of the family. He said and did things no one had ever said or done before. He spoke knowingly about the great king and did powerful things that caused large crowds to follow him.⁵⁸ He opened eyes that couldn't see and ears that couldn't hear. He walked on water, sent demons running, quieted violent storms, and called dead people out of their graves.

Even though there was nothing about the teacher's appearance that distinguished him, he wasn't like other teachers of the family. He befriended public enemies. He ate and drank with some of the most disreputable people of the land.⁵⁹ He changed the hearts of social outcasts, the bodies of lepers, and the minds of the oppressed.⁶⁰

***Even though
he grew up
in obscurity, he
was destined
for greatness.***

He was a man of unequaled power and authority. Yet he carried his power with gentleness.⁶¹ Even as spiritual leaders of the family reeled with envy

and disbelief, he drew crowds of common people as he honored women and held their children.⁶²

With eyes for people no one else saw, the teacher offered invitations to a great banquet where the list of honored guests would include anyone who was willing to come.⁶³

To the concern and alarm of other family leaders, the teacher's crowds grew larger and louder.⁶⁴ They came to the one who asked for the trust of all those who were tired of living the way they were. He promised them rest for their hearts and minds.

Then in an amazing series of comparisons, he claimed to be the door, the water, and the bread they had been looking for. He told them that if they trusted him, he would show them the way back to the tree of life and the paradise that was lost.

DEATH ON A HOLIDAY

In the hours leading up to an important holiday, family leaders became alarmed. Sensing the loss of their own influence, they were afraid that the teacher would use the crowds who had gathered for the annual “sacrifice of the lamb” as an occasion to take over leadership of the family.

Believing they had to act quickly, enemies of the teacher made a bold move.⁶⁵ Family leaders organized a crowd of their friends and filed a legal complaint with government officials. Risking the anger of the teacher’s followers, they accused him of disturbing the peace and dishonoring the name of the great king.⁶⁶ Within hours they pressured local bureaucrats to give in to their demands. A weak-willed but powerful judge

had the teacher beaten and turned over to executioners.⁶⁷ Along with two common criminals, the most loving teacher the family had ever seen was nailed to a tree like a predator on a fencepost.⁶⁸

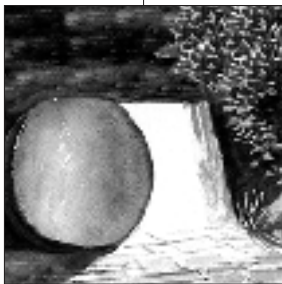
The most loving teacher the family had ever seen was nailed to a tree like a predator on a fencepost.

As his mother and friends cried, soldiers swaggered. Family leaders huddled with a sense of relief. Strangers who walked nearby on a public road stared. A few hours later, his body was buried quickly in a borrowed tomb on the eve of “the sacrifice of the lamb” holiday.

UNEXPECTED RESULTS

The teacher's followers couldn't make sense of what happened. One minute they were listening to the wisest, most loving man they had ever seen. The next minute he was subjected to an unfair trial, declared unfit to live, and sentenced to die. Now he was gone. The teacher's life and vision for the future seemed to end as quickly as he had come.

After 3 days of living in the shadows, the teacher's friends saw the unexpected happen again. Their mood suddenly changed. First a group of women reported that the tomb where the teacher had been buried was empty.⁶⁹ One woman claimed that she saw him



alive and spoke with him. Soon whole groups of men and women announced that they too had seen him.⁷⁰

The friends' lives changed dramatically. In the days and years that followed, many of them were killed for refusing to deny their story. Their courage convinced many of their neighbors to believe that the friends were telling the truth.

In whispered conversations and behind closed doors, enemies of the teacher tried to figure out how to offset the reports of the friends. They knew that people lie to save their lives, not to lose them. They knew that some even die for what they believe to be the truth. But they would soon find out that the followers of the teacher would suffer for

more than a belief. They would die for their claim that they had seen the teacher—alive and well—after his death.

The teacher had one more surprise for his friends. As they stood talking with him on top of a hill, he defied gravity and rose weightlessly from the ground until he disappeared in the clouds.⁷¹

As the friends stood speechless, looking into the air, two messengers appeared to them and said, “As you have seen him go, so he will return.”⁷² Later, the friends remembered that the teacher himself had told them that he would return for them at a time they did not expect.⁷³

Yet he also promised that he would never leave them. He assured them that

28

even when they could no longer see him, his spirit would always be with them.⁷⁴

LIFE-CHANGING NEWS

During the public life of the teacher, some believed he would follow the pattern of other false hopes. They predicted that once he was exposed



as an impostor, his friends would disband, sadder but wiser for the experience.

The opposite happened. After the teacher's departure, the movement rapidly grew in numbers and intensity. As word spread through the region, many became convinced that they had been visited by more than a teacher. From the movement's point

of view, every indication was that the great king himself had visited his people.⁷⁵

Many found the explanation not only compelling but life-changing. The story was told in public arenas, marketplaces, and family gatherings. In city streets and countrysides, young and old alike heard that the king's death on a tree was directly related to the two trees he himself had planted in the center of the first garden of the caretakers.

In the beginning of caretaker history, the king had pointed to one of those two trees and said, "The one who eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will die."⁷⁶

When the first couple ate of that tree, they died spiritually and began to die physically. With spiritual separation and mortality

came a separation from the king.⁷⁷

Now, however, a third tree stood between the first two. The tree on which the king died became the means by which he paid for the caretakers' decision to eat of the forbidden tree.⁷⁸

***All along, he
had planned to
fulfill his vision and
protect his citizens
by personally and
voluntarily paying
the price of their
freedom.***

Finally, the king's plan could be told. All along, he had planned to fulfill his vision and protect his citizens by personally and voluntarily paying the price

of their freedom.⁷⁹ All along, he had been planning to sacrifice himself for those who were destined to die for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Within a short time, the king's friends were traveling the world, spreading among people of all nations the news of another tree—a tree of rescue that was used in paying the price for the caretakers' wrong choices. This message was for everyone. The great king was offering citizenship and family privileges to anyone who would accept his offer.⁸⁰

Until he returns, the realm of his kingdom exists in the hearts of all who acknowledge him as king and trust his offer of forgiveness and everlasting life.

The king's story is a story of love and mercy.

30

No one returns to paradise on his own merit. All return only by being like one of the two criminals who died on either side of the king. One mocked the king for

*The king's story
is a story of
love and mercy.
No one returns
to paradise on
his own merit.*

not being able to save himself. The other acknowledged his own wrongs and said to the king, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." In response to a simple request of faith, the king said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."⁸¹

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE KING'S VISION

In some ways, the king's story ends where it began. What started with a paradise lost ends with a paradise found. According to the king's own predictions, the rebel and all of his followers will be defeated and removed from the earth.⁸²

Through a series of catastrophic endtime events, the king will break the will of his enemies in much the same way he broke the grip of the prince of the south. Then, finally, with the defeat of all enemies, the king will return to live among his people forever.⁸³

For now, no one can imagine what the king has

in store for those who have trusted him in this life. In many ways his future, like his past, is shrouded in mystery.

What we do know is that the king promised that the time of his return would be a surprise. We also know that up until now the king's ideas have always



been wise and good. We know that he has given us reason to trust him with our lives, with our fears, and with the rest of the

story as it unfolds.

This is our story. It reminds us who we are, where we've come from, and where we're going. It helps us to see the choices that are ours in the free world of the king.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THAT IN THE BIBLE?

We have used some creative license in retelling the greatest story ever told.

But we have tried to tie everything to the intent and ideas of the events and principles of the Bible's own storyline.

The following biblical references correspond to the superscript numerals that appear in the text:

1. Gen. 1:3; **2.** Gen. 2:7;
3. Gen. 2:15; **4.** Gen. 2:18-20;
5. Gen. 2:21-22; **6.** Gen. 3:8a;
7. Gen. 2:16-17; **8.** Isa. 14:12;
9. Rev. 12:4; **10.** Gen. 3:2;
11. Gen. 3:7; **12.** Gen. 3:11;
13. Gen. 3:12-13; **14.** Gen. 3:22-24; **15.** Gen. 4:8;
16. Gen. 4:13-14; **17.** Gen. 6-8; **18.** Gen. 9:18-10:32;
19. Gen. 11:3-4; **20.** Gen. 9:1; 11:4; **21.** Gen. 11:5-9;
22. Gen. 12:1-3; **23.** Gen. 17:1-8; **24.** Gen. 21:1-6;
25. Gen. 41:56; 42:1-2; 46:27;
26. Ex. 1:7-10; **27.** Ex. 1:14;

28. Ex. 2:23; **29.** Ex. 3:1-10;
30. Ex. 4:1-9,29-31; **31.** Ex. 5;
32. Ex. 7:14-10:29; **33.** Ex. 11-12:30; **34.** Ex. 14; **35.** Ex. 16:1-3; **36.** Ex. 16:4; 17:6; **37.** Ex. 20:1-18; **38.** Lev. 4:27-35;
39. Lev. 1:1-6:7; **40.** Num. 13;
41. Num. 14:29-35; **42.** Josh. 3:14-17; **43.** Dt. 9:1-6;
44. Gen. 12:3; **45.** Jud.;
46. 1 Sam. 8:1-8; **47.** 1 Sam. 12:12-15; **48.** 2 Ki. 17:7-12;
49. 2 Ki. 17:13; **50.** Isa. 2:1-5;
51. 2 Ki. 25:8-12; **52.** Ezra-Neh.; **53.** Isa. 11:6; **54.** Mal. 4:6; **55.** Lk. 2:25-32; **56.** Lk. 2:36-38; **57.** Lk. 2:39; Jn. 1:46;
58. Lk. 4:40-42; Jn. 7:31;
59. Lk. 15:1-2; **60.** Lk. 4:16-40; **61.** Mt. 12:15-21; **62.** Mk. 10:13-16; **63.** Lk. 14:12-24;
64. Lk. 12:1; Mk. 3:20-21;
65. Lk. 22:47-54; **66.** Lk. 23:1-5; **67.** Jn. 19:1-16; **68.** Lk. 23:33; **69.** Lk. 24:1-9,22-24;
70. 1 Cor. 15:3-8; **71.** Acts 1:9; **72.** Acts 1:10-11; **73.** Mt. 24:44; **74.** Mt. 28:20; **75.** Jn. 1:1-14; **76.** Gen. 2:16-17;
77. Gen. 3:22-24; **78.** 1 Pet. 2:24; **79.** Heb. 9:19-28;
80. Acts 11:18; **81.** Lk. 23:39-43; **82.** Rev. 19:19-20:3;
83. Rev. 21-22.

Get your free Bible Resources catalog!



Discovery Series booklets can be valuable guides to help you learn what the Bible says about a broad range of topics. Each 32-page booklet can be used in your personal Bible study or in a small-group setting.

Your free Bible Resources catalog includes a brief

description of each Discovery Series booklet. To get your copy, write to us at the address below and ask for a catalog. Or follow the link below to request your copy today.

www.discoveryseries.org/catalog

USA: PO Box 2222, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-2222
Canada: Box 1622, Windsor, ON N9A 6Z7