

MILE

1

TRANSFORMED – Our Lives Renewed to be Like Christ (a DISCIPLESHIP Journey)

Mile Marker 1 ... “GOOD NEWS: Our Stories Become a Part of God’s Salvation STORY”

A special focus on Ephesians 2:1-10

Overall, **TRANSFORMATION** is our focus for this broader discipleship journey. As followers of Jesus, God has invited us to an eternal relationship with Himself. We have the privilege of embracing His wonderful promise to us in Christ. However, as we see with Jesus’ first disciples in Matthew 4, Jesus’ call is also about “following Him” with our lives. We will consider this theme more thoroughly in Mile Marker 2 – what it looked like for them and what it looks like for us. For now, we need to see this: Jesus’ invitation is not *just* to be saved at the end of our earthly lives; it’s an invitation to live as His followers *even here-and-now*. It’s about our lives becoming more and more like Him – TRANSFORMED by His Spirit as we are made new. Again, over the course of the next several weeks, this will be our primary emphasis.

At the same time, it is *impossible* to even begin thinking about following Jesus and transformation without talking about salvation first. That’s why we are focusing in this first mile marker on the GOOD NEWS – **God’s STORY of salvation**. Especially throughout the pages of the New Testament, a definite pattern emerges: what He has done for us *always* precedes our RESPONSE to Him. That’s the Good News of amazing grace; it’s what is so simply and beautifully announced in John 3:16 ... it all begins with His love for us. To get the order out of whack and put our actions before His turns Christianity into any other religion – all of which emphasize human effort to attain or earn. In our faith, it’s about our response to what He has first done! That’s why we start this discipleship journey with this story of salvation: our stories become a part of God’s STORY – the overarching story of Scripture.

For your reflection: what do we miss about our lives of faith if we forget the basic order – it’s first and foremost about what God has done for us?

Stories

We are familiar with stories. We can think about fictional novels we have read or movies we have watched; they run a wide gamut of specific types of stories. We can think about biographies – the story of someone real. We can think even about history – the story of a certain group of people (*e.g.* American history is really just the telling of America’s story).

For your reflection: What are some of your favorites stories (e.g. books, movies, etc.)? What are some basic characteristics of any story?

With any story, there is a beginning that is connected to an end (unless it is still being told) with events that unfold in between, usually with conflict that has to be resolved. Of course, there are many more elements (*e.g.* characters, setting, etc.), but the basic concept of a story is all about a plotline of connected events that take the story from its beginning to its end.

HIS Story

Before we get to our stories, we start with His grander STORY. Obviously, there are many individual stories within God's Word; and yet, we often lose sight of this BIG STORY – the STORY that runs throughout the Bible, even the story of humanity. It is the story that runs from God dwelling with His created people in Genesis 1 to God dwelling with His redeemed people in Revelation 21-22. Indeed, like with any story, there is a beginning that is connected to an end with events that unfold in between to move the plotline along. At the risk of over-simplifying, let's trace the BIG STORY of Scripture – it's a good way to see how it all fits together (*references are provided for you to dig-in to these texts if you're so inclined*):

It's a story that begins (remember Genesis 1:1) with God's CREATION (Genesis 1-2). Within the narrative of Genesis 1, special attention is paid to the creation of human beings – those made especially “in God's image” (see 1:26-27). As the first humans, they are representative of the whole human race – their status of intimate relationship with God implies our intended status within His design.

It's a story that continues with the FALL (Genesis 3). Through the sinful choice of Adam and Eve, sin entered the world. With the help of the tempter, they rebelled against the good and loving authority of God, disobeying His instruction not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Things haven't been the same since (*check out Romans 8:18-22 for what Paul says the entire created world experiences because of the fall*)! Most notably, death now enters the equation. Just as their original status implies our intended status, their choice to sin becomes representative of us as their sin has consequences for all humanity – even more, it also becomes the choice we too all make. With the conflict between our good God and the Evil One, this sin-produced reality becomes *the problem* that must be resolved in the STORY.

It's a story that becomes all about REDEMPTION (Genesis 12 onward). Things continue to unravel because of sin in God's “good” world. It leads to the flood (Noah) and the eventual scattering of all people. After it all, He sets into action His plan to fix what had become broken – to REDEEM. Actually, even within the scene of Genesis 3, there is an anticipation of “the seed of the woman” (Christ!) who would crush the head of the serpent (see 3:16). That reality begins to be fleshed out starting in Genesis 12 where we see the call of Abram. **READ Genesis 12:1-3.** Part of the promise to Abram is that God would bless *all families* on earth through him. While there is much more to the Old Testament than this, within the STORY of Scripture, its place is simple: it tells the part of the story of this one man from whom this special nation would come, through whom God would send the Messiah to bring REDEMPTION to the world He had created and humanity which had become mired in sin.

At the heartbeat of the REDEMPTION story is obviously Jesus – the centerpiece of God's plan to REDEEM the world. The Father sends His One and Only Son into the world to bring about the salvation of His people (**READ Galatians 4:4-5; see also John 3:16**). It's the story we celebrate at Christmas – His arrival as the Messiah. It's the story of a sinless life. Of course, it's ultimately the story of His death, burial and resurrection on the third day (**READ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4** – **this is the basic Gospel or Good News; this is the story that is the climax of each of the 4 Gospels**). Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sins of

the world. Of course, He didn't stay dead; on the "third day," God raised Him from the dead completing the work of the cross. Forty days later, He ascended back to heaven, leaving His church behind with the task of spreading this GOOD NEWS of salvation to the whole world (remember Genesis 12:1-3!). All of this happened according to God's plan, the plan that He had put in place to deal with sin and bring about redemption (**READ Acts 2:22-24**).

The story builds to resolution at Jesus' return to bring about RESTORATION. If you were to read Genesis 1-2 and compare that scene to Revelation 21-22, it's striking how similar the end looks to the beginning. That's fitting because the "end" is really about things being put back to the way they were meant to be *in the beginning* – RESTORATION! Without a doubt, the GOOD NEWS does not stop with the announcement of what God has already done through Jesus; it also announces *what He will still do* when He sends Jesus back to earth (**READ Acts 3:20-21; Romans 8:19-25; Philippians 3:20; Titus 2:12-13 and Hebrews 9:27-28**). His return will bring sin, the curse and even evil itself to an end. It will bring about the restoration of God's creation. It will usher in an eternity of God dwelling among His people.

This is God's grand STORY – from CREATION to FALL to REDEMPTION and RESTORATION. It's the Good News of salvation that comes through Jesus – what God has done, because of His great love, to deal with the problem of SIN. We could think of this "story of salvation" along these lines:

**"SALVATION NEEDED" → "PREPARING for SALVATION" → "SALVATION is HERE" →
the "SPREADING of the message of SALVATION" → "SALVATION COMPLETED"**

It's a STORY that moves from a beginning to an end – a STORY that God is moving from His original creation to the eternal re-creation. It's a STORY that resolves the conflict of sin and evil through God's VICTORY. It's a STORY that unfolds as God carries out His purposes within history through Jesus. The best news of all? God allows for *our* stories to intersect with this STORY!

For your reflection: How does looking at all of this as a cohesive STORY lead you to respond to what He has done and the love behind it all? How does it encourage you regarding what He has promised about how the STORY will end?

Our Story

Of course, this broader STORY especially matters to us because *our* stories become a part of His STORY. Throughout the New Testament, we see texts announcing this GOOD NEWS and what it means for us and our stories. Of course, the central focus is on Jesus' death and resurrection, the heartbeat of the Gospel. We want to look at Ephesians 2:1-10 ... it's a single text that tells our stories from SIN to God's actions in Christ to SALVATION through our faith in Him. **READ Ephesians 2:1-10.**

Part 1 (2:1-3) SIN as part of our stories

For your reflection: Really stop to consider what this text says about the condition of each person – including each one of us – because of sin ...

Part 2 (2:4-10) What God has done to change our stories by saving us

Notice the **"But GOD ..."** at the start of v. 4 – it's a reminder that the GOOD NEWS is about what He initiates and accomplishes, not about what we make happen.

“Because of His great LOVE for us ...” – it’s about God’s action towards us because of His free choice (unconditional), not because of our worthiness (*see also Romans 5:6-8*).

“... God who is rich in MERCY ...” – it’s the kindness He shows in sparing us from what we truly deserve because of our sin (*remember v. 3; see also Romans 1:18-3:20 or 6:23*).

“It is by GRACE you have been saved” – it’s not about what we have earned or what we can take credit for on our own, but it’s *the GIFT* God freely offers to us because of the price Jesus has paid for us = **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense** (*see also Titus 3:3-7*).

FAITH is the only *human* element involved at all in salvation according to this text (*i.e.* “when you believed” in the NLT – it is best to see this as a broad umbrella word for our response): we respond by placing our trust in what God has done for us (*see also Romans 3:21-26*).

*NOTE: While this particular text doesn’t highlight other aspects, God’s Word also includes the following as part of our initial faith response to God’s gracious offer of salvation: **REPENTANCE** (see Acts 2:38), **CONFESSING Jesus as “Lord”** (see Romans 10:9-10) and even **being BAPTIZED/IMMERSED into Christ** (see Acts 2:38 + many other instances in Acts; Romans 6:3-5; Galatians 3:26-27 and even 1 Peter 3:21).*

There is no reason to see any of these as violating the idea of “saved by grace through faith” – none of these are “works” we are doing to earn anything; they’re simply the way God’s Word would say we respond in faith to what God has done for us.

For your reflection: How does this overall Good News of grace radically fly in the face of the way we typically think and the way life typically works? Why does that make it hard for us to be able to grasp?

At the same time, what does all of this say about the seriousness of our condition because of SIN and how utterly unable we are to fix that problem? Is that how we typically think of our condition?

Notice the contrast between vv. 1-3 and our condition in vv. 4-10.

Pay attention to where this text ends in 2:10 – we are **“God’s WORKMANSHIP”** ... the end result of what God has done in our stories is about us embracing what He’s re-created us to be and do. While good works cannot save us, they are what we are designed to do because of what we have become in Christ.

How do we keep the importance of “good works” (and, for that matter, anything we do as an expression of our faith) properly balanced? Consider Philippians 1:11.

MEMORIZE as much of Ephesians 2:1-10 as you can – if you’re doing it in a small chunk, memorize 2:8-9 ... if a bigger-but-still-partial chunk, memorize 2:4-10.

Our Ongoing Response. The Good News of Jesus is first and foremost an announcement of what God has done through Jesus to make our stories a part of His STORY. And yet, if and when we properly grasp what God has done, how can we possibly not respond?

What type of response comes to your heart and mind when you think of what God has graciously and lovingly done to make your story a part of His STORY?