

The End of the Beginning

When you read a story it is important to know what part of the story you are in. For example if you read J. R. R. Tolkein's classic story The Fellowship of the Ring you will be caught up in the adventure of the great wizard Gandalf and a fellowship of eight who commit themselves to find and destroy a magic ring that is the source of much evil in Middle Earth. It is a great story with many exciting moments however during the story their wise leader and guide Gandalf falls into a great abyss and is lost to them, one of the eight companions, Boromir is killed, Frodo and Sam get separated from the others. In the end, the grand fellowship of the ring is broken and scattered, no one knowing for sure what to do or where to go. Now, if you thought that was all there was to this story then the end would be unbearably disappointing. You might wonder why anyone would even write such a depressing book. Hopefully someone would tell you, no, no that's not the end of the story, that's only the end of the beginning. You need to keep reading, you need to read the next book, The Two Towers.

With great relief you quickly head down to Mardels and buy a copy and begin reading again. And once again you are caught up in a wonderful and amazing tale of courage and perseverance and adventure. And as you notice the pages getting fewer and fewer your excitement grows because you

know now you are finally coming to the end of the story. But as you approach the conclusion once again you begin to worry. The evil Gollum, who promised to lead Frodo and Sam to Mordor, where they were to destroy the ring, instead leads them into a trap. Frodo is attacked by a giant spider and stung. Sam at first thinks Frodo is dead then discovers he is only unconscious. However the evil Orcs have captured Frodo. With great frustration and despair you read the last line of the book. "Frodo was alive but taken by the enemy." Again you cry out in dismay. What kind of a crazy story is this? Who would write two books that end so badly? But then you stop and think. If this story didn't stop with the first book, maybe it doesn't stop with the second. Quickly you run back to Mardels and discover to your great delight, yes, there is a third book, The Return of the King. With great anticipation you buy the book and immediately head home hoping finally the evil orcs will be defeated, the evil wizard Samuran will be killed and the evil ring will once and forever be destroyed. And your hopes would be gloriously rewarded, for the end of "The Return of the King" is not just the end of the third book, it is the end of a great, epic tale, "The Lord of the Rings" and the culmination is so joyful, so triumphant, so unimaginably glorious that all the trials and suffering and pain that came before pales in comparison to it.

So, you see it makes a great difference to know where you are in a story. If you are at a place of hopelessness and despair and you think it is the end of the story, well that is a very depressing way to end a tale. In many ways this is the persistent problem of God's people, knowing exactly where they are in God's story. This is the point repeatedly made in our lessons, the importance of discerning between the lower story and the upper story. For Israel, sometimes the lower story was terrible, like the days of captivity in Egypt or the wanderings in the wilderness. Other times their lower story was great like their mighty crossing of the Red Sea or the establishment of David's kingdom and the early glory of Solomon. But the lower story constantly changes and if we happen to be living in a bad time, unless we know that there is an upper story, a greater story, God's eternal story, life can become hopeless and meaningless in a hurry.

Our last few lessons have dwelled on some of the most horrible if not the most horrible moments in Israel's lower story. Beginning with the corruption of Solomon, we have witnessed the pervasive wickedness of Israel's kings, the civil war between the tribes, the division of the kingdom into northern Israel and southern Judah, the devastating destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria and the northern tribes scattered throughout the world, forever lost and finally the Babylonian invasion of Judah, the

destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem, the leveling of Solomon's glorious temple and all the precious temple artifacts stolen, and thousands upon thousands of Judah's best and brightest marched off to live as slaves thousands of miles away in the land of Babylon. It is not surprising that when we began this series of sad, heartbreaking stories the title given to our lesson was "The Beginning of the End."

What a terrible place to be in Israel's story. Their once glorious city, palace and temple is now only a pile of rubble: their once mighty army now mostly dead, the rest in chains; their once international reputation as a wise and virtuous and powerful land, now the butt of jokes for court jesters in every kingdom from Egypt to Persia. And the great promises that they had received all seemed lost. The promise to Abraham to become a great nation in the land of Canaan. The promise to Moses to be a chosen people of God. The promise to David of a son who will always be on the throne. Had there disobedience been so bad, their wickedness so great to cause all these promises to be revoked? I think it is very difficult for us to fully appreciate the depth of the despair that these Israelites must have felt. We get a hint of it in one of the psalms (as read from "The Message"),

Alongside Babylon's rivers we sat on the banks; we cried and cried, remembering the good old days in Zion. Alongside the quaking aspens we

stacked our unplayed harps; That's where our captors demanded songs, sarcastic and mocking: "Sing us a happy Zion song!" Oh, how could we ever sing GOD's song in this wasteland? If I ever forget you, Jerusalem let my fingers wither and fall off like leaves. Let my tongue swell and turn black if I fail to remember you, if I fail, O dear Jerusalem, to honor you as my greatest. GOD, remember those Edomites, and remember the ruin of Jerusalem, that day they yelled out, "Wreck it, smash it to bits!" And you, Babylonians—ravagers! A reward to whoever gets back at you for all you've done to us; to the one who grabs your babies and smashes their heads on the rocks!

Harsh words, even hateful words, but these are the words of a broken people, a people who probably hate themselves for their own foolishness as much as they hated the Babylonians. One of the young men of Jerusalem who was led in chains out of his country by his Babylonian captors expressed the hearts of many if not most of the Israelites when he lifted up a prayer of profound anguish and confession for how wicked and stupid his nation had been. This is what Daniel prayed.

"Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and

done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. “Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you.

If this were the end of the story, what a terrible story it would be. But it is not the end of Israel’s story. It was not correct to entitle these last chapters “The Beginning of the End.” A more accurate title would be “The End of the Beginning.” For that is where we are in God’s story of Israel as we come to the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. True, it is the end of the Old Testament, but like the Fellowship of the Ring, the Old Testament was only the beginning of God’s story, only the first book. There was more to come, much, much more. Prophets like Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah told the captives that their captivity would not be forever. There was another book to be written, another chapter in their story. God would raise up a prince who would take them back to their homeland. Isaiah told of a second

for a new temple. Once again the lower story was starting to look good. People had great hopes that all the old dreams were new again. But as so often happens in Israel's history, things change. There is great opposition to rebuilding the temple. During the years of captivity the land of Israel has become habited by a people who were a mix of the Jews who remained in the land and the many different foreigners who were deported to the land by the Assyrians. The result of these mixed marriages were a people called the Samaritans and they were threatened by the return of these "pure" Jews who wanted to restore Israel to its former glory. Their opposition to Zerubbabel and his campaign to rebuild the temple discourages the Israelites. And even when they finally finish laying the foundation for the new temple, many who were old enough to remember Solomon's temple notice that this new temple was not going to be nearly as impressive. So once gain Israel's disappointed, disheartened and soon distracted. Gradually, the people grew weary of the work and began to build their own homes, establish their own businesses. Their return to the land stirred new hope that they were coming to the great triumphant climax and all the promises that had been made to them would come true. But after a brief resurgence of hope, once again it looks like their story will not end well. Yes they are back in their land but they are still slaves under the control of Persia. Yes a son of David leads them but it does

not appear he will be the mighty king promised. Yes they are rebuilding the temple but it is much less impressive. Perhaps they are still God's people but it doesn't appear being God's people makes much difference.

This is where the prophets enter the story and remind Israel where they are in their story. This is not the end anymore than their captivity was the end. There is more to come. Haggai rebukes Israel for losing hope and becoming more interested in their own houses than the house of the Lord. "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." In other words, do not start living as if today is all that matters. Do not forget that you were chosen for something greater than living in fine houses and making lots of money. If you do forget the bigger story you belong to then all your efforts and activities today will have no real meaning. Haggai tells them about another book that is to be written, another story still ahead of them. They are not living in the end of the story, only the end of the second book. Listen to what Haggai says about the book that is yet to be written. "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens

and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, I will fill this house with glory, the glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house. And in this place I will grant peace, declares the LORD Almighty.” Haggai stirred up the people and they quickly returned to their work and finished building the temple of the Lord, in record time!

Haggai helped the people remember there was more to life than the lower story they were currently in. There was God’s upper story. This humble house they are building will see a glory unlike anything seen even in Solomon’s day. At the time they could not know exactly what Haggai’s prophecy referred to. But we do, for years later a child would be brought into this temple, a son of David, Daniel’s Son of Man, Isaiah’s prince of Peace, Jesus, Immanuel, the Word made flesh, the Son of the Living God. The people who heard Haggai preach didn’t know then what we know now, but they did come to believe that they were part of a much bigger story that was yet to reach its climax. Believing that made all the difference in their lives. Knowing they were part of a bigger story than themselves gave them the faith to believe that even the humble temple they built could be used by God for grand purposes; believing in the bigger story gave them courage to overcome the constant opposition and ridicule and criticism they faced; it

gave their life deeper purpose; God and his eternal future became the center of their lives rather than merely enhancing their present life with paneled walls and putting their gold in bags with holes.

We face the same challenge today in the Church. We don't know for sure where we are in the upper story of God. Are we near the end? Are we about to enter a glorious period where God's people will be seen by the world like the world once saw David and Solomon's kingdoms? Are we in a time like the wicked decline of Israel when God's people became captivated by idols, rejecting the holy principles of God's law and seeking only their own pleasures? Or are we about to enter a time more like Israel's captivity or Ezra and Nehemiah's humble return to the land? We have no way of knowing what our own lower story will be like. Many Christians think we are in for hard times in the near future; we may see our own temples torn down and people with no respect for Yahweh take over our land. That may be true. But the lesson of Israel throughout the Old Testament is that no matter what might be going on in the lower story, the upper story continues unabated. And knowing that changes how we live.

Like Frodo and Sam, we do not know exactly where we are in the larger story. We cannot know if our tale comes at the end of the first book

or the second book or the last book. But where we are in the story is not what matters. That we are in the story is what matters. Frodo and Sam continued their mission, continued their journey because they believed that whatever might be happening to them now cannot compare to what would eventually happen in the end. And whether or not they would be able to enjoy the final end depended on how they lived right now.

This is what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 3. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed... Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

This week had been a week of great suffering and great joy. We began the week suffering with our beloved Marie and Kenneth as they had dangerous surgeries to correct debilitating and painful conditions and with Jason and Jennifer Johnson and their family going through the terror of

seeing their youngest boy severely injured and nearly killed in a 4-wheeler accident. We end the week celebrating the joyous wedding of two young lovers in our church family. That is how it is in the kingdom, in the lower story, the constant cycle of joy and pain, celebrating and suffering. But it is all meaningless, if all we have is the lower story. Praise God we have more. We know that wherever we might be in God's story, whatever might be going on right now, how we live is not based on today but on our blessed hope for a final day when the climactic end of God's grand story finally comes. Tolkein titled the third and last book of his great story "The Return of the King." That's a great title for the end of our story as well. For we believe that one day we will see the heavens standing open and there before us a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True, with eyes like blazing fire, on his head many crowns... his robe dipped in blood, his name the Word of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. A new heaven and a new earth, a Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." There will be no

more night...for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

Just like God’s people in Ezra’s day, we cannot be sure exactly where we are in the story, whether we are nearer the end or the beginning. But wherever we may be we can believe the promise of Haggai. We can believe that our lives are defined not just by what is happening right now, but by the far greater glory of what will happen one day. And that makes our life today far more important than merely building paneled houses or putting gold into bags with holes. Whatever chapter we may be in, our lives are made meaningful by the last chapter, the return of our King on that great day of the Lord. And if our eyes remained fixed on that great day, then the joy that awaits us will enable us to endure whatever may come along our way.