



Today I want to tell you a story...

This is a story found in the Bible, about God, a being who has always existed and is the creator of everything. God is the only one in this story who always does what is good, right and perfect—the Bible calls him holy. While God created the foundations of the earth, angels (his first creation) were there watching. They sang together and worshiped God... but some of these angels rebelled against God and his ways. The Bible teaches that all rebellion against God is called sin. And because of God's holiness he will not allow sin to remain in his presence, so he sent the rebellious angels, now known as demons, down into darkness on the earth.

Then God decided to create another being, called humans, in his own image. God said, "Let us make man in our image to be like us." He then prepared the earth as a place for the humans to live—filling the earth with plants, birds, fish and animals of all kinds. God created the first humans, Adam and Eve, and placed them in a beautiful garden and trusted them to care for and rule over all of his creation on earth. He told them, "be fruitful and multiply."

Daily, God would come and spend time with the humans, walking with them in the cool of the day. He showed them how to live in the best possible way—a life lived close to God and under his protection—a life that is full and complete and eternal. God looked at all that he had created and saw that it was *very good!*

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve eventually chose to rebel against God and his authority, choosing to live in their own ways instead of his. Since God will not allow evil and rebellion to remain in his presence, Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden, away from God. Separated from God and no longer following his ways, they were now subject to sickness, pain and death. God told them, "The way you have chosen to live will bring you great struggles and pain, and then you will return to the ground from which you came." Not only were these humans now separated from God because of their sin, but they would also suffer death as they were separated from the Giver of Life.

After leaving the garden, the number of humans on earth grew rapidly. Sin spread from Adam and Eve to their sons and it continued to spread from generation to generation. Even though humans were created in God's image, everyone chose to disobey God. They all constantly acted out in violence against each other. This went on for thousands of years.

Then God established a special relationship and a covenant promise—representing the deepest of all agreements—with a man named Abraham. God told Abraham, "I'll make you the father of a great nation and famous throughout history. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. The entire earth will be blessed through your descendants. I will always be your God and you will always be my people."

Abraham's family, called the Israelites, were to be a new kind of people who would show the world what it means to once again live in God's ways. God gave them a vast amount of land where they enjoyed his blessings as they grew into a large nation.

But as time went by the Israelites began doing what was right in their own eyes and rebelled against God and his laws. They stopped trusting in God and worshiped idols—people, things, wealth and power—over God. In their rebellion, the Israelites faced great struggles and ended up a defeated nation of slaves. But God continued to love his people and promised that one day one of their descendants would come to rescue and restore humanity, and all of creation, back to the way God originally created it.

Then there was 400 years of silence between God and his people.

The Israelites, called Jews, had been under the control of other nations for hundreds of years. They were now ruled by Rome, the most powerful empire that the world had ever known.

Finally, God sent an angel to a young woman named Mary in the town of Nazareth. The angel appeared to her and said, "You will become pregnant and have a son and you are to name him Jesus. He will become a king whose kingdom will never end! This will happen supernaturally by God's Spirit, so this baby will be called God's Son."

God revealed to Mary and her soon-to-be-husband, Joseph, that this boy was the long awaited Messiah King, the one whom God promised he'd send to rescue his people! Sure enough the next year, Mary gave birth to a son whom she named Jesus, which means "the God who saves." Jesus grew up in both height and wisdom, and was loved by God and everyone who knew him. He

lived a remarkable life, always choosing to live in God's ways and do what was good, right and perfect.

As a man, Jesus called people to follow him, inviting them to be a part of what he called the kingdom of God. Calling people to once again live under God's rule and reign. He said, "God blesses those who realize their need for him; the humble and poor, the gentle and merciful—the kingdom of God belongs to them. God blesses the pure in heart and those who hunger and thirst to be with him." He taught people that the kingdom of God is within our hearts.

He said, "God showed his great love for people by sending me—his only son—to this world. Anyone who believes in me and lives in my ways will find life that is complete and eternal! He sent me here to save people—not to judge them. Those who want to live in sin and darkness will reject me and bring God's judgment on themselves. But those who want to live in God's ways will trust me and live forever!"

As God had promised, he sent Jesus to rescue humanity from sin and the penalty of death. God accepted Jesus' perfect life in place of our own. Jesus was brutally beaten and died painfully on a wooden cross, taking the punishment that all of rebellious humanity deserved! Three days later Jesus conquered death when God raised him back to life and he was seen by over 500 eyewitnesses.

Soon afterward, Jesus went to be with his Father in heaven, rising up into the clouds right before his followers' eyes! He promised that he would send his own Holy Spirit to come and dwell within them. The Spirit would remind them of all Jesus taught, transform their hearts to be like Jesus, and give them power to walk in the ways of God like Jesus did. Jesus also sent his followers to go out and tell others about him—his life and his sacrifice for their sins—and lead them to trust him and walk in his ways.

This was the beginning of what the Bible calls the church—a community of people all over the world who, because of Jesus, once again enjoy a life that is full and complete—living in the ways of God.

We can join this amazing story. The story continues with us!

The Bible also tells us the end of this story...

Jesus promised to come back one day to destroy all evil, sin and rebellion. Then there will be no more sickness, pain or death. God's kingdom will come in fullness, and everyone and everything will live under his rule. Until then, we get to live in his ways, giving people a foretaste of what life is like in the kingdom of God.