



## God's Story

September 2007... Scotty Smith

Four years ago, in October 2003, David Arms and I met at the Green Hills Starbucks to collaborate over coffee. I had a gnawing longing, and I was convinced David had the art and the heart to make this longing a reality. I had just one not-so-simple request. I ached for someone to capture on canvas the Story from which all stories come... God's Story, as it progressively unfolds in the Bible, history and in broken hearts.

To say I was stunned when I walked into David's studio and saw the completed piece for the first time would not do justice to what I felt. Overwhelmed by beauty, I rejoiced in David's capacity to capture the glory of the most wonder-full story in the world. But as I continue to study the painting as a whole, and every little detail prayed and brushed onto the canvas, I experience the full range of emotions God's Story calls forth in the hearts of those who enter it. Both David and I hope this will be your experience as well.

God's Story comes to us as a redemptive drama in four parts.

**Creation**—when everything was as God meant it to be.

**Fall**—the tragic intrusion of sin and death, resulting in the pervasive brokenness of all people and everything God has made.

**Redemption**—God's astonishing promise to redeem his fallen image-bearers and creation through the grace-full work of his Son, Jesus Christ.

**Consummation**—the magnificent fulfillment of God's plan to gather and cherish a people forever, and to live with them in a more-than-restored world, called "the new heaven and new earth."

Each panel of the painting presents one of the four interrelated parts of God's Story, and each is replete with well chosen symbols. First you notice that a tree is the predominant image in each panel; each tree is tagged with an identifying word: life, loss, love, and again, life. Why was a tree chosen as the best symbol to tell God's Story? When God first created mankind, he placed Adam and Eve in a garden paradise, called Eden. In the middle of the Garden was the tree of life, a clear statement and celebration of the fact that God is so very good and generous. It is from God that we receive life and it is from him that *all* blessings flow. However, the tree of life wasn't placed in the center of the Garden just as a reminder of the goodness of God, but also of the "godness" of God. God is God, and we are not! The tree of life calls us to great gratitude *and* great humility.



Thus, in the **first panel**, depicting **Creation**, we see the tree of life standing tall and verdant. To the left David has painted three Black-capped Chickadees, whose cheerful disposition and life-giving call represent Adam and Eve, and all of creation, singing God's praise. The pristine wonder of the beauty, truth and goodness of the first heaven and first earth compelled such a full-hearted full-voiced response. The prominent bright red apple in the upper right corner represents both God's gracious provision and the loving prohibition he placed on Adam and Eve. As his trusted stewards and beloved image bearers, the first man and first woman were free to eat from the fruit of *any* tree in the Garden of Eden, except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Though the Bible never says the fruit of this tree was an apple, this notion became well-established legend. *Whatever* the fruit, death was the promised consequence for violating God's boundary and clear warning. Listening to the enticing lies of the serpent, Eve and Adam chose to disregard God's will, and the result was catastrophic. Sin and death entered their hearts and every sphere of God's creation. As a result of the **Fall**, nothing remained as it was meant to be. Everything and everyone was broken. The first couple, who lived in shameless nakedness before God and one another, was now filled with fearful brokenness, perpetual hiddenness and blaming spitefulness.



In the **second panel**, the haunting ashen hues underscore the polluting, alienating and destructive effects of sin. To depict the tragedy of the **Fall**, David placed a starkly barren "tree of loss" (note the tag) beneath the level of the tree of life in the first panel. **Creation's** clear sky is gone, and now the heavens are heavy with dark clouds. The grating screech of two ravens, perched on the horizon, overtakes the invigorating song of the Chickadees. One of these "life-swallowing" scavengers looks back at the **Creation** glory lost in the **Fall**. The other looks ahead, suggesting that the **Fall** will not be the final chapter in God's story.

Ravens appear in the Biblical narrative, and the history of literature, in two distinct ways. These ominous black birds are often used as a symbol of death and God's judgment (Isaiah 34), but ravens also appear in God's Story as a sign of provision in times of need. The prophet Elijah was miraculously fed by ravens in the wilderness (I Kings 17:1-6). Jesus called his anxious followers to see in ravens an example of God's faithfulness to care for them, for they are of *much* greater worth than birds (Luke 12:22-24). The raven looking to the right draws our attention to the third frame.



The same God who brings great judgment also promised to bring an even *greater* **Redemption** to the world. In the **third panel** we see the foundation and first-fruits of this **Redemption**. Higher in elevation than the tree of loss, the “tree of love” emerges in the visual narrative. This tree is a compelling declaration of God’s irreversible commitment to make all things new through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. God will not leave his beloved creation and creatures enslaved to sin and death and the comprehensive damage of the **Fall**. He took upon himself the hard and heart work of **Redemption**.

This incomparable act of mercy and grace explains the presence of an empty cross at the center of the tree of love. God loved the world so much he gave his only begotten Son, and the Son willingly paid with the currency of his life. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” (Gal. 3:13). Jesus willingly took the judgment we deserve for not loving God and our neighbors as the Law demands. The cross is empty because Jesus has done everything necessary to reconcile unloving and lawless people, like me, to God. His death, so grand in its implications, also secured the ultimate renewal of *all* things.

God did not send Jesus to die on the cross as our substitute as an afterthought; Genesis 3:15 tells us that he planned this **Redemption** from the beginning. As God’s Story unfolds in the Bible it becomes more clear that the Messiah, the promised deliverer, would bring salvation, not as a great political leader, nor as a powerful king, neither as a religious revolutionary. Rather, he would be revealed as God’s suffering Servant, who would lay down his own life as a sacrifice for the sins of those he came to deliver. Isaiah, one of Israel’s prophets, foretold the Messiah’s great humility and unparalleled sacrifice in these words:

*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. <sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:3-6).*

Indeed, what wondrous love is this?

*Third panel—cont.*

The New Testament unambiguously declares that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. His death on the cross fulfills the promise and hope of Isaiah, and *all* the prophets. Jesus is the main character in the entire story God is telling, and it is by the sacrifice of his blood that we are made whole and creation will be healed one Day. Notice that David has painted a *scarlet* thread which binds each of the four panels to one another, emphasizing that the unparalleled sacrifice Jesus made for us is central to the whole story. The scarlet-thread binding also reminds us that God is telling one big story, not four different stories. WE cannot possibly understand any one aspect of God's Story apart from engaging with the whole glorious drama. Many distortions of the Christian faith result from a failure to do so.

In playful orbit around the tree of love we see three butterflies. These beautiful creatures represent the emergence of new life from death. Through Jesus' resurrection from death, new-creation life is emerging in the lives of those who know him and in every sphere where he brings his kingdom reign to bear. Those whom Jesus sets free are free indeed, but none of his followers are as free as they will be one Day. This reality is captured by the other central image in the third panel. Positioned above the tree of life is a single egg. As a symbol, the egg holds forth the promise of present life and of greater life to come.

Resurrection life in Jesus is a life of "the already and not yet." The clouds filling the fallen sky are now lifting in the third panel, but they are not completely gone. Believers *already* enjoy a measureless trove of treasure in Christ, but *not yet* do they savor the fullness. As God's image bearers, echoes of the glory of Eden reverberate in our hearts. We know there was a time when everything was right and nothing was broken.

And as those who enjoy the first-fruits of **Redemption**, our yearning for what is ahead intensifies. A growing tension between sadness and hope is a mark of our journey home. We "groan inwardly and wait expectantly" because we are pregnant with glory, and birth pains abound. David captures this gradual and groaning ascent home by positioning the tree of love higher in elevation than the tree of loss, but not as high as the tree in the last panel, where once again, we meet the tree of life.





The **fourth** panel attempts and approaches the impossible – to visually capture **Consummation**—the completion and eternal wonder of God’s Story, the full beauty and radical implications of the **Redemption** promised and provided in Jesus Christ. This is why David *had* to allow the elements in this final panel to spill over beyond its borders. The consummate fulfillment of all of God’s promises *cannot* be contained in one frame! “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, neither has it even entered into the imagination of man... the things that God has prepared for those who love him!” (1 Cor. 2:9)

In this last panel, David has painted the tree of life much larger than in the first panel and has placed it noticeably higher as well. This powerful image refers to a deep and profound biblical reality. In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, we encounter the reappearance of the tree of life, but it’s hardly recognizable as the same tree described in Genesis 2. The message is clear. The **Consummation** of God’s Story is much grander than its beginning in **Creation**! In God’s Story, the movement is not back toward the Garden of Eden but forward and toward the new heaven and new earth. The Garden of Eden was just a preview of coming attractions! The beauty of the sky in the new creation world will far surpass that of the first **Creation** world. This is why the placid blue of the first panel has become a deeper and richer blue in the fourth panel.

A cornucopia of lush fruit also seizes our attention in this panel. Why so much and such grand fruit? The Scriptures promise that the tree of life will offer citizens of the new heaven and new earth a different crop of fruit each month, and the leaves of this life-giving tree won’t just provide shade, but “healing of the nations.” Indeed, the tree of life, as described in Revelation 22, represents the fulfillment of God’s covenant to redeem a people for himself and to restore his broken creation. The sheer enormity and diversity of fruit in the fourth panel invite us to consider the abundance, beauty and adventure God’s people will enjoy forever and ever in the new heaven and new earth.

But who are the people God so graciously redeems? Who will eternally enjoy full access to the presence and presents of the tree of life, and life in the never-to-be-broken-again world? According to the promises of **Redemption**, God is reconciling to himself, and to one another, a family from every single race, tribe, tongue and people group... from every period of history. War, tribalism, racism, and pettiness will be gone forever, along with death, mourning, crying and pain!