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NEW CREATION

Why Movies Make Us Cry

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
HAMLET, ACT III, SCENE 1

My wife's favorite movie is a largely forgotten flick from the late '90s. It's called *What Dreams May Come*. The title comes from Shakespeare. But the film has nothing to do with anyone named Hamlet. The main character is played by a young (and now lamented) Robin Williams. Yet if you've seen the movie, you know it's miles from the comedic shenanigans of *Mrs. Doubtfire*. It's a drama, a sad one, and I don't like those.

The story begins when a family man named Chris Nielson (played by Williams) is killed, along with his

children, in a violent auto accident. It's a terrible tragedy, and it leaves only Chris's wife to cope with the anguish of losing her entire family in an instant. It's heart-wrenching. And it becomes more so because, in the film, Chris's ghost is allowed to observe as his wife spirals through a cycle of pain, depression, and ultimately, suicide.

Did I mention that I hate this kind of movie?

Only later does the plot begin to bend in less catastrophic directions. The film is *not* a tragedy. It is a kind of fantasy. Or perhaps, a romance. And it becomes so in a dramatic scene in which the mild-mannered Chris Nielson reaches a decision. He loves his wife. He cannot accept that she is gone forever. He *won't* accept it. And in the movie, he doesn't have to. Despite warnings that rescue is impossible, and despite a verdict that his bride must languish forever in the darkness (supposedly) designed for suicides, Nielson resolves to get her back. He will charge the gates of hell itself if that is what it takes.

And so he does.

The Devil's in the Downy!

If I were *another* kind of Christian writer, I might spend the next pages chumming Bible verses and ranting about how this kind of movie is decidedly unbiblical. The departed can't mount rescue operations to remove the damned from Hades! I could pound my pulpit and go on about how the story presents a picture of heaven and hell that is altogether contrary to Scripture. And

I'd probably be right. "It shows where Hollywood is taking us," I might say. Then I'd follow this rant with a string of e-mail forwards and a proposed boycott of Robin Williams's favorite laundry detergent. We could even coin a slogan. Something catchy like "The devil's in the Downy!"

I could do that, but I'm not going to. Instead, I'm forced to say what happened the last time I watched the movie, beside Brianna, all curled up on our fake leather loveseat. What happened was, I cried like a school girl. And not just because I love my wife, or because the film was well done, or because the usually-manic Robin Williams somehow shone brightest in dramatic roles. That's all true. But there is another reason also. I cried, in part, because for whatever reason I found this version of the afterlife compelling. While it may not be the Christian one,¹ still it struck a chord within me. It was gripping and I wondered why.

Perhaps part of the reason stems from the fact that many of our pop notions of the afterlife have left us with some pictures, and frankly some sermons, that just aren't very interesting.

Don't get me wrong, phrases like "heaven" and "eternal life" sound great. But in most cases, they do not sound like an edge-of-your-seat *adventure*. In some cases, they sound comforting, but rather boring. In fact, if you were to ask the average Joe or Jane on the street to describe the hereafter, there is a good chance they would mention a few key elements. They might speak of a place called "heaven" as a location in the sky. A place where

people walk on clouds like floors, listen to harp music, and wear halos.

And in fairness, that all sounds nice. After all, relaxation in the sky seems preferable to pounding widgets at a dead-end job. Total peace with harps and halos sounds better than the endless headlines of war and famine. And even the cloud-floor thing sounds better than Grandma's green shag carpeting. It all sounds nice. But it doesn't sound that interesting. And therein lies the problem.

The pop version of the afterlife is just not a movie that I'd want to watch. It actually sounds a little boring. Don't believe me? Try and name something more monotonous than sitting cross-legged on a cloud while Yanni's harpist plays a never-ending PBS special. That's not interesting. And it raises what is, for me, the central question of this final chapter: Why did the (unbiblical) movie make me cry?

After all, I don't cry much. I'm what you'd call *emotionally challenged*. So why did I find this fictional afterlife more compelling than most sermons I have heard on the subject? Here's one possibility.

How to Ruin a Story

I heard recently that the single surefire way to ruin any story is to leave out the one feature that is absolutely essential. No, it's not sex. The crucial feature is *conflict*.² According to some literary experts, the indispensable element of any good story is the undeniable sense that there is something at stake, imperiled, or contested.

Something must hang in the balance, and dealing with the conflict determines how things end.

The conflict is what keeps us interested. Without it, we are destined to put down the book, change the channel, or simply walk out of the theater.

Exactly what's at stake is less important. It could be Romeo's love life; it could be the racing rivalry between a certain tortoise against an odds-on favorite hare; or it could be a husband's last-ditch chance to be with his wife. Any of these storylines may work, but the fact remains that something *must* hang in the balance. And if it doesn't, your story will stink.

I heard this conflict theory a while back and it left me wondering if this might be part of the reason why some pop versions of the afterlife leave me yawning. Perhaps they seem less inspired because while the absence of things like death and tears and torture seem wonderful, the apparent absence of adventure, suspense, and yes, even *conflict*, leaves us wondering what there will be to keep us interested.

Admittedly, that seems like an irreverent question. It seems like the kind of question that could get you corrected by the Sunday school teacher. Yet it's with this rather irreverent question in mind that I'd like to revisit what the Scriptures say about the final chapter in God's long and beautiful Story. I'd like to revisit what the Bible actually says about the way our drama culminates. But before we explore what the Bible says, perhaps we should examine what the Bible does not say, and that involves a reference to a certain '80s rock band.

The Apocalypse and Michael Stipe

It was R.E.M. that first sang me a memorable sermon about the end of the world. You may remember it. (If you are a youngster with no memory of that decade, just YouTube it—you'll see what I mean.) It's one of those classic '80s-'90s anthems, and I can still hear it pumping through the tiny factory speakers in my first car, an excrement-brown-colored Toyota Corolla.

The melody (not unlike my car's overworked engine) had a cadence like a machine gun. And the rapid-fire lyrics had a way of worming into your brain. It could get annoying over time, but as far as I know, the song still holds the distinction of being the only rock number to scream the name of "Leonard Bernstein!"

Behind the wordy verses, the theme was *apocalyptic*. It was about the end of the world, and it even came complete with end-times imagery (earthquakes, hurricanes, you get the drift). You might even confuse it for the stuff of cheap Christian fiction. But then there was that little wink at the end of each chorus. It was about the end of the world "as we know it." And as Reverend Stipe was proud to tell us: he felt *fine*.

That last line always stuck out to me. It seemed like an odd way to end. And it made me want to ask the author a question: Excuse me, Mr. Stipe. I'm sorry to interrupt your vocal performance and all, but how is it that you can be so calm? After all, you are singing about the end of the world. How can you feel fine?

I was asking this question one day on the highway, when I came to what I think is a pretty obvious conclusion.

Perhaps when R.E.M. told everyone that the world was coming to a fiery end (spoiler alert), they didn't mean it literally. The song was apocalyptic, yes, but like all good apocalyptic literature (Scripture included), the writer knew his way around a metaphor.

Back to the Bible

This may seem like a silly point to make, but it leads to an important truth. The biblical writers also use imagery that seems, at first glance, to describe the literal end of the space-time world. They speak of the sun turning dark and the moon to blood (see Mark 13:24; Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20). They speak of beasts with horns and epic battles with fire and brimstone. It's intense. And perhaps because of this intensity, we sometimes fail to consider what ought to be obvious. Perhaps the inspired writers of God's Story were at least as skilled in their lyricism as a washed-up '80s rock band.³

Scholars tell us it was common practice for biblical prophets and poets to describe earth-shattering events with earth-shattering imagery. In the Bible, everything from the fall of empires, to the destruction of Jerusalem, to the birth and death of kings is portrayed in ways that sound like Armageddon. Startling images are used, *not* necessarily because the writers were foretelling the fiery end of the space-time continuum, but because radical imagery was the only language robust enough to sufficiently convey the magnitude of the spiritual, emotional, and historical situation.

Unfortunately, these passages are easily taken out of context. And this can cause some problems. It causes problems because when it comes time to talk about the return of Jesus and the consummation of God's renewed creation, we are suddenly forced to separate the vivid metaphors from more literal predictions of future events. And that's not easy. Tough questions arise. When is a prophet using apocalyptic imagery to describe, say, the fall of Babylon or Rome, and when is he describing something yet to happen in the distant future? Might he be doing both? It seems so.

There is ambiguity, and much ink has been spilled in the attempt to definitively iron out the mystery of God's future. Every year dozens of (ridiculous) books are sold to people who want the inside scoop on how the world will end.

I was reminded of this a few years back when I walked past a Christian bookstore-souvenir shop in my old hometown. Apparently, the store was making at least some money selling books that claimed to show how Sadaam Hussein (deceased Iraqi dictator and first runner-up for world's greatest mustache) was, in fact, the long-awaited Antichrist. Who knew? The books occupied a huge shelf and sat prominently at the front of the store. They were the first things you saw as you entered and the last thing you saw as you left. On each one was a big sticker telling how the book was fast approaching best-seller status.

So a few months later, when the mustachioed "Antichrist" was caught and executed for crimes against humanity, I decided to return to said bookstore. Not

surprisingly, the books had been moved from their coveted shelf space. But I was still able to find one or two copies hastily shoved to the back of the bargain book rack. They were marked down. A lot. For somewhere in the neighborhood of \$2.99 you could take home a one-time best seller, or two hundred pages of substandard toilet paper.

Since I was a young theology student at the time, the trip to the bookstore was a lesson learned. It's easy to take creative liberties with apocalyptic imagery. It's a relatively easy way to write books like this, and it's a relatively easy way for publishers to make money. Unfortunately, it's also an easy way to do violence to God's plotline. So before diving into the fictional end-times hoopla, we might do well to remember something from the R.E.M. song.

The biblical writers were lyricists too. They knew a metaphor when they saw one. And even conservative Bible scholars are increasingly ready to admit that some passages once thought to refer to the literal end of the world are, in fact, using vivid metaphors to describe historical events that have already happened (e.g., the fall of Babylon, the fall of Jerusalem, or the persecution of the early church by Rome). At least sometimes.

The warning, then, is simple. While God does have something to say about the consummation of his drama, there's a lot the Bible *doesn't say*. And we would do well to remember that. Speculation may sell books, but it doesn't do justice to God's Story. Now back to the question at hand!

Already

What will new creation be like when it finally comes?

One thing is clear. When the Scriptures speak of this event, they *rarely* speak of an exclusively future occurrence. When the Bible speaks of new creation, it usually speaks of something that has *already* been inaugurated. The startling message of the New Testament is that new creation broke into this old world on the day when Jesus sat up inside a borrowed tomb, wiped the sleep of death from his eyes, and walked confidently into the morning sun.

God's new creation started with the incarnation and, especially, the resurrection. And since Scripture starts there, perhaps we should follow suit.

The new creation message of the Bible is this: what God did for Jesus physically (raising him to eternal life on the third day) God has begun, and will complete, for us as well. Paul says it this way: while we were dead in our sins, God made us alive in Christ (see Colossians 2:13). In other words, while we were spiritually deceased, God raised us to new life in Jesus (see Colossians 3:1). We were walking corpses and God made us alive in the Messiah. And the good news is that our *spiritual renewal* has implications for the physical world as well. Salvation isn't just about beaming our immortal souls to heaven.

To be sure, "heaven" is a real way of speaking about those who have gone to be with Christ upon their death. As Paul puts it, to be absent from our earthly body is to be present with the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:8). And as Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross, "today

you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). So this spiritual existence in heaven is a promise for Christians after death. It’s real. As Christ’s followers, we go to heaven when we die.

Even so, God’s final chapter is even better than this. That’s because God’s ultimate plan is not about getting your ghost to the Great Beyond so you can sit on a cloud and drink (non-alcoholic?) mojitos. God’s final salvation is about renewing the entire physical cosmos as we know it. It involves a bodily resurrection (just like that of Jesus), and as the New Testament hints, aspects of that final resurrection have *already* begun. In a letter to the church in Corinth Paul says it this way: “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).⁴

Take a moment to reread that. Chances are, it may not be quite the translation you are used to. If you’re like me, you grew up hearing it like this: “if anyone is in Christ, *he* is a new creation.” And while that’s certainly true, it is also zooming in the interpretive lens so much as to miss the wider implications of Christ’s victory. In the original language, the passage reads more like this: “If anyone is in Messiah: new creation!”

The point is simple. The Scriptures tell us that salvation is not just about what God wants to do for you as an individual (though that’s part of it). Salvation is also about what God wants to do *for* the entire created order! That’s the hope of the gospel. It’s not all about you! It’s about an entirely rejuvenated cosmos rising from the ashes of a fallen world.

This is what is so unbiblical about the consumer mentality that sometimes pervades the American church.

Even in our theology it is possible to think of ourselves primarily as customers consuming religious goods and services to meet our personal needs, while all the while missing the entire point of the gospel. I was reminded of this increasingly when I became a pastor and began to strike up conversations with newcomers to our church. When I asked many of these folks what brought them to our gatherings, I was often met with a very interesting response: “We’re just *church shopping*.”

Church shopping?! Where did we get this phrase? Who taught us to talk about the bride of Jesus like a used Buick?! “Sure she rides nice, but does she come with heated seats?”

Perhaps the saddest thing is that those who use this lingo are not seekers or agnostics. The people who use this phrase are church folks who have been taught that religion is a product to be shopped for like a new pair of jeans. Many of them are nice people, but they have managed to exist for years in a church without ever grasping even the most basic message of the Bible. We exist as Jesus’ body, not to be served, but to serve. We have been graciously forgiven by God, so that in gratitude we can spread this grace to others.⁵ We enter the Jesus-community to aid the coming of God’s renewed creation. That’s the point! But somewhere amid our wealth and privilege, many of us (myself included) have missed it.

New creation began when the lungs of Jesus took their first breath inside a damp and darkened tomb. And new creation continues with us. It continues when we take our first breath of God’s transforming Spirit.⁶ But there is one more step to come. New creation also awaits

a future fulfillment. It has begun *already*, but it is *not yet* finished. And it's toward the *not yet* that we now turn.

Not Yet

The flipside of new creation is this: the world is still fallen. It still groans out as in the pains of childbirth. We still smell the stench of sin and death around us and within us. It's present everywhere and it often seems to rule the day. Pain is everywhere and it leads us to ask an honest question: If God's new creation really has begun, then why doesn't it seem like it?

It's a question that God's people have asked in different ways for centuries. It's difficult, but the best answer we possess is this: at the moment God's kingdom exists largely undercover. We see it breaking in from time to time: in a church family that chooses to swim against the stream of consumerism and racial division, in a married couple that chooses the path of forgiveness when they want to just give up, or in a businessperson who chooses to use his or her wealth on something more redemptive than just a bigger house and nicer clothes. We see new creation breaking in through things like this, yet we still await a final decisive act to bring it into its fullness.

We still need rescue, and the hope of God's last chapter is that rescue *is* coming. Jesus *will* return. The Scriptures promise it (see, for instance, Acts 1:11). But when he does, it won't be just to extract cowering saints from the rubble of a forsaken planet. It won't be to evacuate a bunch of me-focused consumers so we can live on a cloud. This is

the story of religious dualism. It's *not* the story of the Bible. The story of the Bible is that Jesus will come *down*—down into the heart of this beautiful disaster—and make known his indisputable victory over evil. New creation will come in full. And when it does, the created world—the world of California Redwoods, Michigan microbrews, and Miles Davis music—will be transformed.⁷ This world will not be flicked away like a smoked-down cigarette. It will be renewed. Now a word on that.

Booing the President

Several years ago, I had a run-in with a certain U.S. president. Exactly *which* president is not important, but it happened when the chief executive decided to pay a visit to the town where Brianna and I were living. The visit was supposed to be somewhat of a surprise, but just a few days before, the local media broke the news that the leader of the free world was dropping by to speak at a local middle school.

Unfortunately, the leader of the free world neglected to invite me to his speech. I'm over it, but the snub meant that for me “the big day” was just *Friday*. And Friday was my day off. As such, it usually began with a trip to my favorite coffeehouse and a morning filled with two of my favorite things—chemically induced euphoria (i.e., dark coffee) and one-sided conversations with dead people (old books).

That's what I was up to when the president came. I spent the morning at my favorite coffee bar, before leaving for home and lunch.

Except this day I couldn't get home. I couldn't make it because as I pulled our teal Chevy Cavalier out of the parking lot (yes, I graduated from brown excrement to teal), I quickly realized that virtually every street had been cordoned off for you-know-who. He's such an attention hog. My quiet drive looked a bit like a parade route. Police were everywhere. And it was then that I saw them.

They had signs and they were yelling angry things that I couldn't hear at first. Apparently, they hadn't been invited to the speech either. Some of them had even composed special artwork for the occasion, mostly stick figures and exclamation points. Upon listening closer, I could hear them chanting about a war, some lies, and about some other things I couldn't quite make out. They wanted the president to see them, and they wanted him to know that they weren't happy. They wanted him to know that while he may have expected a warm reception, he wasn't going to get one. Things weren't being run the way they wanted, and the presidential visit was a chance to let people know.

Greeting the King

When I finally made it home that day, I thought about the way the Bible describes the so-called second coming of Jesus. Specifically, I thought of a passage written by Paul. It goes like this:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God,

and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess. 4:16–17)

It's an important passage. And a few things are clear: Jesus *will* return; the dead in Christ will rise to new life; and we will be with the Lord, forever.

Unfortunately, what is perhaps easiest to miss in Paul's metaphorical language is the very analogy that he wants to bring to mind. Despite appearances, I don't think that he is speaking about a kind of *Star Trek*-inspired rapture in which Christians are beamed up to heaven while non-Christians are left behind on earth. Despite what many (mostly American) Christians believe on this, there is little basis for the view in either Christian history or the Bible itself. It is virtually nonexistent in the first nineteen centuries of the church, and it is never taught explicitly within the Scriptures. In short, Paul isn't talking about an evacuation. Paul is talking about a royal return that will bring about the renewal of our fallen world.⁸

In the passage, he is comparing the return of Jesus to the return of an emperor (or king) to a city that is suffering. And, interestingly enough, it is just this kind of visit with which the letter's original recipients (Jesus-followers in a town called Thessalonica) would have been familiar.

Here's how it worked. In such times, a once-proud city would be ravaged by famine or fire or earthquake.

Scores would be killed, buildings would be decimated, and the social fabric of the community would be torn apart. Yet despite the best efforts of the citizens to rebuild and restore things on their own, the obstacles were sometimes too great. Not all problems can be solved by pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps and just trying harder. What such ancient people needed in this scenario was the renewal and rebuilding that only their lord (a common title for the Roman Caesar) could provide.

And occasionally, if the lord was feeling generous, he would come.

As the lord and king approached, the tired citizens would be so ecstatic that they would not wait inside the shattered city. They could not wait. So they would go to greet their ruler *outside the gates*. They would leave their homes and neighborhoods and they would meet their sovereign beyond the city limits. Here, they would welcome him, not with picket signs and accusations, but with thanksgiving. The lord had finally come to Thessalonica, and the people would rush out to meet him.

But then the ruler would do something important. Rather than order the citizens to relocate elsewhere. And rather than simply pitching a tent beyond the city's broken gates, the Roman lord would make a unilateral decision. He would march back into the ravaged city with its citizens, and *together* they would start anew. The lord and his subjects would return together to the place where death and destruction had reigned and the ruler would make things right.

Many scholars agree that *this* is the imagery Paul draws upon when describing the return of King Jesus. It

will be like a presidential visit, he says, like a *royal visit* to a disaster zone—but with a crucial difference! Rather than greeting our King with picket signs and angry rhetoric, God’s people will join their Lord (whether figuratively or not) “in the air”—beyond the earthen boundaries of our ravaged creation. And together we will return *with Jesus* to rebuild the ruins of God’s good creation.⁹

This is the point proclaimed by the entire storyline of Scripture: Jesus is not leading an evacuation movement! He is not leading a retreat! And he is *not* coming back to take us away! The return of the Messiah is not a relocation to an immaterial heaven where we live as ghosts. It is not a last-minute extraction from a napalm-smelling war zone. No! Jesus is coming to renew the broken world that he loves—and we are called to join the effort. This is the promise of a renewed creation. *Everything* will be made new, and we will be with our Lord, forever.

What about Hell?

In all of this, the careful reader will note that I have not yet made even a single mention of a place called “hell.” There is a reason for this omission. We stated at the outset that our goal was to tell the story of God’s people, and for God’s people, hell has no place.

In several places, the Bible does indicate that there will be some who willingly reject King Jesus.¹⁰ There will be some—including some religious types—who spend their lives undermining God’s actual purposes, subverting God’s agenda, and standing like angry

protestors before the King of kings. If we are honest with the Scriptures, we cannot deny this—no amount of fancy Greek word studies can get you out of it.¹¹ Our King does not force anyone to enjoy his presence. And if there are those who have hated the way of Jesus in this life, we have no reason to expect that they will suddenly enjoy it in the age to come.

But with this conclusion, comes also a caution. As Christ-followers, we must reject the temptation to pronounce judgment on who is definitively “in” and who is “out.” That’s not our job! The text makes that much clear.¹² And if God’s surprising storyline has taught us anything, it is that grace has a way of exceeding our narrow religious expectations.¹³ It is not our duty to track attendance in God’s final kingdom. Our duty is to live in such a way as to make way for the King. Because he’s coming back.

This is the same message found in the often-confusing book of Revelation. Here we are bowled over by the imagery of a beautiful city (the renewed Jerusalem), coming *down* out of heaven. (Note: it’s coming down!) And it’s at the sight of this symbolic city that the writer hears words that fall like rain on parched soil:

And I heard 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.” He who was seated on

the throne said, “I am making everything new!”
(Rev. 21:3–5)

This is the good news of God’s final chapter. After many twists of plot along the way, after many failures and false steps, the great drama turns out well! And on the edge of new creation, we will look backward and appreciate the artistry.

The story starts in a garden. In the beginning, a pair of happy honeymooners are asked to care for God’s good world. They are asked to do something with it—something constructive. But they fail. The Story starts with a garden. But the Story *ends* in a city. Even so, it is not the kind of city in which smog and concrete cover green and growing things. It’s a garden city, with rivers and minerals, light and leaves—and the tree of life (see Revelation 22). The story ends with God bringing order to chaos and building with his hands what we could not build alone. The story ends with a glimmering city coming down to rest on the earthen soil of a once-broken world.

The plotline ends with a promise that in spite of all our faults and failures—our youthful indiscretions and our aged priggishness—the Creator God is making *everything* new. Revelation tells us this, and it ends with an announcement: “Behold, our Lord is coming soon!” (Rev. 22:12). He is coming, and new creation is coming with him.

A Ridiculous Question

In retrospect, perhaps this is a smart place to conclude. After all, it’s where the Bible ends things. Revelation stops with the picture of a renewed cosmos coming fully

to a fallen world. It sounds wonderful, and—again—it is probably a smart place to conclude. Yet we started this chapter with a more peculiar question.

The question had to do with *life* in God's new creation. What will it be like? What makes heaven, *heaven*? And more provocatively: If conflict really is the spice of every earthly story—the necessary ingredient of all narratives—what will hold our attention in a conflict-free world?

The temptation, of course, is to avoid this final question by calling it absurd. Perhaps it is. It certainly invites your criticism. "Who cares if there is no conflict?! Is that such a big deal? Is it really such a tragedy to picture heaven as little more than an endless church service, an eternal reunion, or a never-ending vacation? Is that so terrible?!"

Perhaps not. In truth, the generic pop notion of heaven isn't terrible, but it is incomplete. In fact, some pseudo-Christian notions of the afterlife seem lacking for a simple reason. They are lacking because in some cases they cease to view God as he is *in the beginning*. And in so doing, they change his nature.

Further Up, Further In

Think back. When we first meet the God of the Bible, what exactly is he up to? The writer of Genesis says that in the beginning God is *creating*. In other words, the Creator isn't sitting idly by and enjoying a celestial nap. He isn't basking in the amenities of a heavenly Club Med. When we first meet God, he is creating.

When we first meet God, he is painting new worlds on the canvas of a cosmos he created. He is dipping Word and Spirit into the colors of creation. Like a Playwright, he is shaping a drama from the overflow of his imagination. He is endlessly generative. His love and glory flame forth inherently. How could they not? In the beginning, God is creating.

Yet when many of us picture life with this same God at the end of the drama, the primary images that we conjure up are not particularly creative: people sitting by on clouds; a kind of heavenly all-inclusive resort; easy-listening praise and worship; three chords and redundancy. It isn't terrible. But it isn't that *creative*.

C. S. Lewis seemed to have a problem with this notion of eternity as well. As a storyteller himself, perhaps Lewis had a hard time picturing life in God's new creation in ways that were the least bit boring. (Perhaps writers are more attuned to such matters. We know almost instinctively that God's plotline—however it goes—must be *more interesting* than our own.) For Lewis, life in God's renewed world was never about sitting around on cloud floors with harps and halos. In his mind, life with God was about movement, exploration, and adventure. It was about God's creatures worshipping him and enjoying his new world by moving "further up and further in!"

This was the phrase Lewis used. "Further up and further in!" At its core, it was a call for humans to set out on a new adventure into God's new world. It was a call to bid farewell to the *shadowlands* and to dive into a deeper country in which we will worship the creative Creator by exploring, enjoying, and at all times glorifying the One

who made us for himself. For Lewis, this was life in God's new creation. It was a sacred adventure in which humans were allowed to experience the universe as it was always meant to be.

For Lewis, heaven was not the end of the drama. Heaven was the beginning. It was: "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."¹⁴

Why Movies Make Us Cry

Perhaps this sheds some light on our original inquiry about what makes stories work. We started this chapter with a single loaded question: If conflict is the spice of every good story *now*, what of life in God's new creation? If there is no conflict, can there still be joy?

I think there can.

The reason goes back, if you can believe it, to the strange movie that we spoke of at the beginning of this chapter. The one that was so decidedly unbiblical. Or, if you prefer, the one that made me cry.

Movies do that sometimes. They do it to my wife a lot. We'll be sitting in the soft seats at the theater and I'll hear her start to snuffle. (Then the preview will end and she'll cheer up when the talking soda cup comes dancing out to tell everyone to silence their cell phones.) It's cute.

But movies are not the only things that make us cry. There are other things: the birth of a child, the images of soldiers coming home from war, even the way a singer wraps her voice around a melody. Such things can make

us emotional, *not* because they are sad, but because they awoken a certain universal ache inside of us.

I was thinking about that ache awhile back. Specifically, it was during an episode of that old TV show where people would makeover houses and then give them away like giant fruit baskets. And I've developed a theory about what's going on there.

Suppose for a second that it isn't conflict specifically that makes us care about a story. Oh, conflict is involved of course. But suppose the real reason we are drawn to this spice is that we possess a universal sense that somehow, someday, every conflict must be swallowed up in joy. Perhaps that's why we're drawn to art that bleeds with dissonance. Perhaps that's why even I cry sometimes. And not always in sadness. It isn't the conflict itself that draws us. Rather, it's the primal notion that one day every tear will be wiped away.

When that happens, a door will open on a greater story. And in this story, something greater than conflict will hold our attention. Far from being bored, we will spend our days striving to get closer to the Someone who took the ache away. We will want to thank this Someone, fall at his feet, and spend eons wrapped in the mystery of redemption.

No, it isn't conflict that keeps us interested. It isn't conflict at all. It is the aching sense that one day every conflict will be swallowed up in love. Perhaps this is the root of every earthly joy. Maybe the reason we love anything in this world is that it carries but an echo of the world to come. Morning is coming and we ache to see the light. That's why movies make us cry. We see the glimmer of eternity in the face of a child, in the bend of a melody,

or in the arc of a film—and we know it’s coming. There’s another chapter breaking in. And in that everlasting light of life, what dreams may come?

Engage the Story

Having read about the new creation chapter in God’s Story, it’s time now to engage with it yourself. Read the following passages this week, reflect upon their meaning, and be prepared to discuss them with others:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11
- Revelation 4
- Revelation 21–22

Discuss the Story

1. The final chapter in God’s Story has to do with an entirely renewed creation. It could be argued that this is the hardest chapter to talk about because, for now, we live in a world that is still broken and longing for renewal. For evidence of this, read Romans 8:18–22 together and discuss the following questions:
 - As you look around, how do you see the “groaning” of creation?
 - Despite this groaning, how do you see new creation breaking in through the work of God’s Spirit and God’s people?
 - A more literal translation of 2 Corinthians 5:17 states that “if anyone is in the Messiah—new creation!” What does the verse seem to imply

about the results of God's grace in the lives of his people? Have you ever thought of yourself as an agent of God's new creation?

2. The Bible arguably compares the return of Jesus to the return of a king to his suffering city. To see this imagery, read 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 together and then discuss the following questions:
 - Why do you think this passage is sometimes used to make the argument that Jesus is coming back only to whisk us all away from this dirty and evil world?
 - How does the author confront this perspective with a different possibility?
3. Some Christians make it sound as if our ultimate hope in life is that our immaterial soul would float up to heaven when we die. Without denying the reality of heaven after we die, this chapter politely challenges the notion that an immaterial evacuation is our ultimate hope. Here is the two-fold progression:
 - A. After death, we can trust that we will indeed be “with the Lord” where he is—hence, we “go to heaven” (see 2 Corinthians 5:8; John 14:2; Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; Revelation 6:9–11).
 - B. Even so, the ultimate end to God's Story includes the resurrection of our physical bodies, and the renewal of God's good creation (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; John 5:25–29; Daniel 12:13).
 - Does this two-stage view of the afterlife differ from the one you may have been taught previously?

- What is wrong with the idea that God’s creative project will ultimately be burned up and disregarded?
4. The Bible ends with the imagery of a beautiful new civilization (the “New Jerusalem”) coming down out of heaven, so that all things are made new. Read Revelation 21:2–5 and discuss the following questions:
- Why does the chapter stress the fact that the city in the image is coming down?
 - Many biblical writers longed for the day when God would bring his justice to a fallen world. Do you often find yourself longing for God to come and set this world right? How so?
 - For those undergoing persecution, injustice, or illness, the hope of God’s new creation is often what gives courage to continue living, working, and loving in the midst of difficult times. Have you ever experienced this in your own life? Why do you think it is that some affluent and healthy Westerners may long for God’s new creation in less obvious ways than, say, Christians in other parts of the world?
5. This chapter makes the case that it is our hope in the resurrection that ought to provide us with the motivation to get off our butts and go to work for God as he begins to renew this world. Some individuals might hold the opposite view (that is, because God is going to destroy this world soon, we shouldn’t worry too much about *earthly* matters such as economic justice or environmental stewardship.)

- Have you ever encountered something like this perspective?
 - How would you answer a religious person who articulated a viewpoint not unlike the negative one above?
 - Why is it important that God called his creation “good” to begin with, especially when we consider the ultimate fate of the physical world?
6. Recall C. S. Lewis’s idea that the reason we love anything in this life is because it carries a glimmer of the life to come.

That’s why movies make us cry. We see the glimmer of eternity from time to time, in the face of a child, in the bend of a melody, or in the arc of a film, and we know it is coming. There is another chapter breaking in, and we know it. The Story ends well for God’s people, and this is just the beginning.

- Spend some time prayerfully reflecting on this thought.
- In closing, you may want to pray together one of the final phrases in God’s Story. For instance: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). Bring about the beautiful conclusion to your Story that we have all been waiting for. Rescue this world from sin and death and use us to be a part of that rescue! Amen.