

Sneak preview: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

by [Joy J. Moore](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

"It hasn't always been like this." These words can refer to church life, politics, international relations, urban crime or the economy. They might even refer to the latest Harry Potter novels, which seem to have turned darker and darker—more serious, more ominous, and with the world coming closer and closer to the edge of doom. I don't blame J. K. Rowling for taking her original audience with her as she changes the fictional climate—it's what great storytellers do. They unravel events with which informed readers are already familiar. Each situation unfolds according to the circumstances created by previous actions of known characters.

What happens in the final account depends as much on the hope of the readers as on the desires of the author. It's fiction, right? So after a few astonishing disappointments, everything will end on an encouraging note, with a grand celebration in the great hall, the guy and the girl together, and all of us living happily ever after. Or will it? What if Rowling breaks the rules and lets evil spiral out of control? What if Harry turns away from his comrades and embraces the dark side? Or worse, if all of our heroes—Harry, Hermione, Ron—are trampled by He Who Must Not Be Named? The enigmatic end could be a dramatic departure from the good new-bad news cycle that characterizes most fictional accounts.

In some ways, our editorials and news today are a departure from that cycle. Torture. Persecution. Imprisonment. Death. It seems to be only bad news that is reported, without the good news component. It isn't that way in the Old Testament. Although bad news is fully represented, the Hebrews also have good news. In the reading from Hebrews, persons of faith from Israel's history are presented as forerunners of Jesus and as examples of faithful living. This is the memory of the people of God, shaped by an account of their previous experiences. By faith these ancestors acted in response to bad news: to horrendous evil, hopeless circumstances and heart-wrenching realities.

When we hear the stories of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, we begin to grasp the significance of the phrase "by faith." Like the trailers for an upcoming film, these stories point through the present, whatever it is, to a future

that, like the present, has an omnipotent God.

In Isaiah, the prophet reveals that some of the protagonists in God's drama have embraced the dark side, although the hopelessness and horror are set in "happy" landscapes of vineyards and wedding celebrations. Then, in the fifth chapter of Isaiah, the speaker tells of a skillful and loving caregiver who has tenderly looked after the people of God, who are portrayed in this literary description as a vineyard. Their fruit, however, is woefully rotten.

In a dramatic shift, the voice changes, and like Nathan challenging David, God insists that the people of Jerusalem and Judah stand in judgment of the unproductive vineyard. As Jesus says in Luke 12, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?"

Jesus' question may lead us to challenge the end of the story. Will our heroes be trampled by their circumstances? After all, God's removal of the hedge of protection has left them vulnerable to their own bad choices. The walls of peace have been torn down. So it seems today. We see little justice and much bloodshed; there is no righteousness. The psalmist voices our own cries: How long, Lord? Why? Is this the long-awaited end?

Knowing all that God has done, dare we ask that God turn from judgment and restore the land and its people? Then again, maybe we should be the answer to our own prayers. Let us do what it is that we demand of God. Let us listen to the cries of the needy. Let us practice peace. Let us have regard for the downtrodden. Then we will know we have been restored to relationship with God. When we recognize that the triumph of evil is not simply God's absence but the consequences of our turning away from God, then we can interpret and make a response to the present time. What happens in the final account depends as much on our faith as it does on the desire of God. We have this account to remind us of what God will do if the people of God fail to provide the world a glimpse of God's glory.

We are not at the end of the movie, however. We're in a trailer, or preview—a dramatic scene in the middle of God's action in the world. As our circumstances change, we do not have to worry what the end will be. Christian scripture is an ordered account of God's divine intention to set things right even though we keep

messing things up. If God hasn't given up on the world, then we can face the horrors and heart-wrenching difficulties of this moment, because we know that what we see now is not the way things will always be.

When we pay attention to the revelation made available in Christian scripture, we see what God is doing. And what we see God doing most clearly in Jesus is what we are supposed to be doing in the world. In this, we are reflections of holiness, divine facsimiles. May we be like those named in the 11th chapter of Hebrews, so those who come behind us will find us faithful in "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).