

Shakespeare once famously wrote in the play *As You Like It*, “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.” He actually used that metaphor in several plays, in fact. And I think he was onto something.

Because from God's perspective, it's probably an accurate analogy. We are actors in a grand drama, begun at the creation of the world. And much like the director of a play or movie or TV show is the “god” of that set, defining and controlling exactly how the story plays out, God defines and controls how our story plays out.

And like many Hollywood directors, he doesn't like having that script tinkered with. He doesn't appreciate when we try to improvise on his perfect work. That's what sin is, really. It's humanity improvising on God's script.

In a Hollywood production, that kind of improvisation can occasionally be good and helpful. Some of the greatest lines in movie history weren't in the script. But that's the result of an imperfect writer and director. When God himself is the one writing the script and directing the action, you don't touch it. You don't mess with it. Not simply because He'll punish you if you do. But because, it's just not smart. It's a perfect script. It's as good as it can possibly be. You can only make it worse.

And we see that right from the very beginning. Eve is standing there, in the garden, looking at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And she knows the instruction in God's script: Enjoy this garden. Enjoy everything that I have given you. But don't eat that fruit.

It's a simple stage direction. It's not there to tempt her. Any more than the direction for Romeo and Juliet to fall in love is there to tempt them into staying apart. It's just a part of the script. Of a very good script.

But then the devil shows up. And he tells her, in effect, “God's script isn't very good. You would be such a better actor if you improvised. It would be such a better play if you improvised. You would have such a bigger role in the play if you just improvised.”

And so she does. And her husband does. And they realize, almost immediately, that they have just ruined a good script. So much so that they hide in fear from the director.

Because God is angry. And he tells them, “I brought you into this play because you were good actors who could follow my directions. But if you can't follow a simple script like this? Well, then, you have no business being in my production. Finish your part and then get off my set. You're banned from my stage.” And they lived out a much shorter life than God had ever planned for them. And then they died. Banished from the earth.

That's what death is. It's God telling us, “You're not good enough to be in my performance. You're not obedient enough to follow my script. You're not wise enough to learn my lines. You're not allowed on my stage.”

And that is how the world lived for a very long time. Actor after actor. Actress after actress. Brought onto the stage to perform their part. To live... and to die. None of them ultimately good enough to play the part that God had for them.

So God tried to make them better actors. He brought a select few of them under his wing. He called them the Israelites. And he taught them everything he could. Guided them in their performance. He spent extra time teaching them their lines and pouring over the stage direction with them. They were God's people. He loved them as His own children. And He gave them His Law to help guide them.

And time after time he forgave the mistakes that they made. The times they improvised when they were supposed to be obedient. The times they grew forgetful when they were supposed to be diligent. But even they couldn't live up to God's standard.

Yet, there were those among them who came close. Who played a special part in God's script. Who, though they were sinners who left the stage like everyone else, did so in a way that accorded them special respect and admiration. Their names were Moses and Elijah.

Two men who knew God in ways that we could only imagine. Who had seen him face to face. Who had heard his voice and felt His Spirit. Two men who stood as mediators between God and His people. Prophets, delivering God's wrath, delivering God's comfort. Pleading for the people on their behalf. Whose role was so important that they each took an apprentice – Joshua and Elisha – who learned their master's craft and carried on with their ministries after they were gone.

But maybe more importantly, two men who did more miracles than just about all the other men and women of the Old Testament put together. For both of them made food appear in the wilderness. Both of them performed terrifying acts of power before kings. Both of them restored the sick to full health. Elijah even once raised the dead. Few in all of history can claim to have performed the miracles these two men did.

Moses and Elijah... so much in common between them. So many similar ways in which God used them in his plan of salvation. To the extent that both men died a very special death. For Moses, that meant dying by God's side on a mountaintop, where God Himself buried his body. For Elijah, as we read in our Old Testament lesson, that meant not dying at all. Elijah was swept up into heaven in a whirlwind, taken by a chariot of fire. Exiting God's stage, but never having tasted death.

If there were two men in the Old Testament who could have repaired the script God had written. Who could have rectified the improvisations of mankind and brought about the world He had always meant to create, it was these two men. But neither could do it.

For they were sinners too. Moses improvising in the desert when he refused to call out water from the rock. Elijah improvising on the mountain when he despaired of God's great script for humanity. They both had their strengths, and they both had their weaknesses. Neither could fix a script they themselves had ruined.

No, the only way this script was getting fixed was if the director Himself entered into the play. Dressed in an ordinary costume without a single line at first, few even recognized when the author of this script stepped onto the stage. He was little more than an extra in the drama of the world.

It took thirty years before the director made his presence known. But even then, they didn't know his part. He fed people like Moses: Was this actually Moses come back to earth? He raised the dead like Elijah: Had Elijah actually returned to the stage? They wondered and they questioned and they marveled.

And finally, one day, he brought together his apprentices. His own versions of Joshua and Elisha. And he revealed himself to them. He transfigured Himself. He displayed his glory to them.

And he even brought Moses and Elijah back from behind the curtain for one last encore. So that his disciples could see how similar he was to them, in his miracles and in his role as mediator between heaven and earth. But also, so that they could see how much more he was than either of them. How much greater and wiser and more powerful and more loving than any man who had ever lived.

The author of the script had stepped into his own play. The Creator of all time and history had stepped into His own world. But he wasn't there to ban more actors from the set. He wasn't there in anger or judgement.

He was there to make everything right. To forgive our sin and over-look our rebellion. And make our banishment only a temporary exit from the stage before we all returned at the end of time.

Where we start a new script on a new set. A new heaven and a new earth and a new life. Free of sin and pride and weakness. To be part of the play that God had always wanted to see. Following the script we should have been following from the beginning. Obeying his Word perfectly, in a way we never could before.

All the world is God's stage, and all the men and women merely His players. We play our part. And then we exit. But for us, his disciples, we exit not because we've been kicked out of the play. But because God, in His mercy, has taken flawed, sinful actors, and given us an even better part to play in the end. Amen.