



Chapter One

THE STORY BEGINS

THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

Most people enjoy a good story. Whether it unfolds on the pages of a dusty classic novel, on a movie screen, or over coffee with a lifelong friend, an engaging narrative has the power to raise us to a better state. Maybe it's because we like losing ourselves, escaping from something or to something. Maybe it's the hope we find in stories; they make us believe that we too might experience a fairytale ending. Or maybe we enjoy stories because they connect us. As we listen to or watch a story unfold, we find parts of ourselves in the narrative—in a character or a setting, in an experience or a pursuit. When we are able to relate to a story, even for a moment, we know we are not alone: we know we are not that different from everyone else after all.

Our lives consist of a compilation of small stories that all contribute to our life story, and our individual life stories combine to tell a larger story of our family, our generation, our nation, and our world. But in a society that has become increasingly disconnected, we don't often think of our lives in this way. Individualism and isolation run rampant in our Western culture. Although we are sophisticated in many areas, when it comes to relationships with our co-workers, our neighbors, perhaps even members of our family, we are lacking. We have exchanged intimacy for popularity and quality for quantity. We are enamored with social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and yet we use them not to connect but rather to stay at arm's length from one another. The way we connect with others and how close we allow them to get to us need to change if we are going to be able to see and experience a grander story.

What would it look like if we embraced a different narrative from the one the world around us offers? What if we could be part of the greatest story ever told? What if we already are part of this story and all we need to do is have our eyes opened to a new reality all around us?

THE GRAND STORY

The Bible is a collection of narratives that all come together to tell a much larger story. We call it the grand story. Like most stories, it has a beginning and an end, characters, a setting, and a plot (crisis) that is moving toward some type of resolution. When we read the individual stories, it is easy to get caught up in the details and miss the point of the grand story as a whole. From these individual narratives, or even from smaller pieces of these narratives, we as the Church have constructed all kinds of rules and doctrines—even heresies. We use some of these constructs to protect us, to isolate us, or to grow our congregations.

Maybe we have missed the point. Maybe we need to take a couple giant steps back and catch the bigger picture—because between Genesis and Revelation lies a story like no other. The *crisis* was introduced very early in the story with the fall of humanity. The *setting* is our world. Look around you. Everything you see is part of the story. God has created it and has given it purpose. In fact, everything and everyone has true purpose only within the story. Our lives don't (and can't) make sense outside of this story because there is actually no reality outside of this grand story. The *resolution* to the story comes in Jesus Christ. He is the crescendo of this story—in his first coming and his coming again.

So the story has not ended, and we're all *characters* in it. From our limited perspectives, we may believe we are the main characters, but the reality is that the story is God's story. Yes, we are included, but only because he includes us.

HIS STORY VERSUS OUR STORY

Most of us spend a great deal of our Christian lives trying to figure out how to fit God's story into our own. We want God in our story, but we are not willing to allow his story to supersede our own, so we compartmentalize our faith in such a way that we allow God to become only a *part* of our lives. But God is so expansive that he quickly tears apart the compartments we have constructed to restrain him.

How can we think that all of who God is, his grand story, can possibly fit inside our story? It would be like trying to wrap the book of my life or your life around an entire thirty-two-volume encyclopedia set. Without a doubt, our binding would be brutally torn to shreds after only a couple volumes. So why do we do it? Maybe it's because we see value in his story but we are afraid of losing ourselves in it. Maybe it's because the world has told us that we are priority one and we believe it.

What if instead of losing ourselves in God's story, we *found* ourselves? This is what happens when we recognize our story as part of his rather than the other way around. And when we begin to view life and Scripture from a grander perspective, the Bible is no longer an old book full of unrelated stories that took place thousands of years ago. Instead, it becomes *our* story. *We* were created by God. *We* are the ones who disobeyed and ate the forbidden fruit, the ones who decided to create our own stories. *We* are the children of Abraham, the covenant people, God's chosen ones. *We* are the ones God delivered from Egypt, from the hands of Pharaoh. *We* are the ones who wandered in the desert for forty years because of our fear, stubbornness, and disobedience. *We* are the ones who entered the Promised Land only to lose it again. *We* are the ones who were exiled and then delivered again. *We* are the ones who God has constantly been seeking, for whom Christ has come, and for whom Christ is coming again.

God's story is our story because he is our God and we are his children. The Bible's individual stories start to make a lot more sense when we recognize our own brokenness in them and our need for a savior. Our own stories also start to make more sense as we recognize that we are not that different from anyone else—that we are all connected through him, whether we know it or accept it. And through it all, God's love and grace and mercy shine through over and over again in the midst of our personal and corporate darkness.

Questions

When you were a child, what was your favorite story? To which characters in the story did you most relate? Why?

What is your favorite story from the Scriptures? To which characters and events do you most relate? Why?

Discuss instances when you have tried to fit God's grand story into your individual story instead of the other way around. How did these instances turn out?

Have you ever been afraid that following God might result in you losing yourself? Where do you think that fear comes from?

ENVELOPED IN GOD'S STORY

Write out your story in the form of a timeline. Place important dates and events that you consider to have shaped who you are as a person. You may need to talk to a parent or friend to help you remember some of these things. You can include as much or as little information as you like.

Take your story, fold it up, and place in between the pages of God's story, the Bible. This act places your life, with its joys and pains, in perspective. It is a physical reminder to you that his story has now become your story and your story has become part of God's grand story.



Project

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

If everything we have said is true, then embracing God's story means embracing each other's stories as well. In a great quote that is attributed to the Australian Aboriginal Elder Lilla Watson, she says, "If you come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."¹

In a very real way our stories, and through them our liberation, are "bound up" in each other. We don't mean that we find salvation in or through other people. Salvation comes through an intimate and faithful relationship with God, through Christ, guided by the Spirit, but Scripture makes a very clear connection between our relationship with God and our relationship with each another. Here are just a few examples:

- **Humanity's Creation:** Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that we were created in the *image* and *likeness* of the corporate God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and that we were created corporately. Genesis 1:27 reads, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 2 tells us that it was "not good for the man to be alone" (v. 18) and that woman was created from man that "they will become one flesh" (v. 24). It seems that from the point of creation, humanity has been innately tied together.
- **Greatest Commandment:** In Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is an interesting passage since the two commandments are described as one and appear to be inseparable.
- **Love for God = Love for Others:** In 1 John 4:19-20, John writes, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot

love God, whom he has not seen.” These are some harsh words. And this isn’t the only time this idea appears in the Bible. Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8 mirror these verses as well.

- **Love for Others = Love for God:** So is the reverse true as well, that loving others is equal to loving God? This appears to be what Jesus alludes to in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus says that in serving and loving the “least of these” we have served and loved him!

Thus, we see our stories are intertwined and our liberation is brought to fruition in our recognition and service of the other. This is why community is so important. As we said above, our stories are not created in a vacuum. They are united (or at least they should be). This should be truer of the Church than of any other group because our stories are united through God’s grand story. In fact, we continue this grand story every time we live out genuine community and every time we extend this story to our neighbors.

But who is our neighbor? Well, this is what this book is all about—discovering ourselves in his story so that we can discover our neighbors and in so doing, be a part of the story.



Questions

What do you think God meant when he said that "it is not good for man to be alone?" When have you or do you feel most alone?

In which communities have you felt most at home? Why do you think this was the case?

Why do you think John would say that it is impossible to love God and hate your brother?

Have you ever sensed that in serving someone you were actually serving God? What made you feel that way?

TAKE TIME TO LISTEN

Take some time to listen to another person's story. Ask this person if you can interview him or her to explore the many ways your stories connect. As you listen, pay attention to how this individual's experiences resonate with your own.

Here are a few questions you might ask:

What was the community like where you grew up?

What are your fondest memories of your family while growing up?

What were your dreams when you were a child?

Who are the people who have loved you most in your life?

What do you think is your calling in life?



Project

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING!

Without context, words and actions have no meaning. In fact, life has no meaning without context. As humans, we tend to forget the importance of context and thus pull things out of it. We take a wild gorilla and put it in a cage in a zoo in the middle of a city and wonder why it seems unhappy or becomes aggressive. We take a phrase uttered by a politician and use it against him or her even though the phrase had a completely different meaning when it was spoken. We take passages of scripture and use them to justify our actions even though in their contexts they have nothing to do with how we are using them. For this reason, it is important to understand the context of our story as a whole.

As the Scriptures demonstrate, stories are often layered and complex. For instance, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is a story in and of itself and yet it is only one part of a larger story—the story of Jesus and the inquisitive expert in the law. This story is part of an even larger story of Jesus’ ministry as presented in the Gospel according to Luke. And Luke’s story is only one viewpoint of the Jesus story, which in and of itself is part of the grand story of God, his people and his redemptive plan for us. We could even add that Scripture is only a piece of the grandest story, a story that no book or volume of books could contain nor human words describe.

To better understand the importance of context, let’s consider Luke 9:51 through 10:42 (it wouldn’t hurt to re-read this section). A lot is going on beyond what is presented to us. First, at the time of this passage, a major shift has taken place in Jesus’ story. Jesus has recognized that the time for his earthly ministry to end is drawing near; therefore, he sets out for Jerusalem to face his impending death. Thus, the story has begun to climax and no doubt tensions are high for Jesus and his disciples (see Luke 9:54-56, for example). Second, this shift has launched a focused teaching on discipleship. Jesus knows he will be leaving soon, and he wants to make sure his followers know exactly what it means to be a disciple after he is gone. For this reason, in this passage Luke seems to stress examples of what to do and what not to do. The lawyer rep-

resents the negative example and the Samaritan the positive example. In the same way, Martha represents the negative example and Mary the positive one (10:38-42).

These very simple and brief contextual clues help us read our story with more accuracy and therefore help us better understand what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, the lawyer, Martha, and us. In Luke's story of Mary and Martha, Martha is so concerned about pleasing Jesus and providing for him that she doesn't even take the time to just *be* with him. Mary, on the other hand, recognizes this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to sit in the presence of the Savior and listen. Jesus' response to Martha's frustration speaks volumes into our story.

The lawyer in our story, like Martha, is caught up in *doing* rather than in *being*. This is part of the reason he needs to justify himself by asking the question about who qualifies as his neighbor. At worst, he is attempting to control the conversation: at best, he is trying to figure out what he has to *do* in order to inherit eternal life. Either way, he misses the point! The Samaritan, like Mary, isn't concerned about his own safety or his own salvation. He isn't even concerned about *doing* the right thing (even though he does). The Samaritan acts out of who he is and what he knows. He is *being* a neighbor and in so doing, he is living out love for God and love for his neighbor at the same time.

By considering context, we see that these two very different episodes are linked together, and we see the heart of our parable is not about commandments or earning eternal life. It is not about what we must do or not do. It is about sitting in God's presence and listening to his Spirit speak to us in order that we might be the kind of people who do good and right things simply out of *being* who we are in Christ.

Questions

React to this thought: "Without context, words and actions have no meaning. In fact, life has no meaning without context." What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Think of a time when someone took something you said out of context. How did it make you feel? How was the situation resolved?

Have you ever overreacted in a situation because you were unaware of the bigger picture? Discuss your experience.

How does the context of this parable help shape your understanding?

What is your current context (your social and cultural setting; the places, things, and people that influence you; your belief system)? How does your context shape you?

MISQUOTED

Take an opportunity to read a news article or watch a TV news report in which someone says he or she was misquoted. You can simply Google “misquoted” to find an example. You may also use a passage of Scripture or a sermon. Your example could be about politics, sports, religion, or entertainment. Look at the comments that the speaker was credited with making, and then look to find the larger context of what he or she was saying. Now that you have a broader perspective, do you agree that the individual’s comments were taken out of context? How important is it to know the context before you pass judgment on someone?



Project

CONCLUSION

We live in a world that judges people's value based on what they do or what they add to the household, the business, or our world as a whole. For this reason, we spend much of our time trying to write our own stories. If we can just make a mark for ourselves, leave a legacy, then others will respect and remember us. Then we will be worth something. Then we will be happy or fulfilled.

But Christ, and Scripture as a whole, paints a different picture of success. Success lies in finding ourselves in his story. Success is learning to be his. It is about learning to belong to a community that is being transformed into Christ's image. No story we create for ourselves will ever be as great as the one to which he has invited us to be a part. We only have to join the story.

BENEDICTION

Now, may the God who spoke the story into existence be allowed to permeate your story with his. May you learn what it means to be his and to operate out of this being. May you find yourself in a community in which you learn to let go of your tendency to isolate yourself and embrace the world around you as part of his body.

What is the first story you remember hearing? Or, what is your earliest memory? Why did either of these stay with you?

Why do you think stories have such a powerful impact?

Outside of the Christian grand narrative, what other grand stories shape the way people live?

Think about the passages that were mentioned regarding the connection between loving God and loving his creation. When did you first recognize this important relationship? How does this realization shape the way you live?

If you chose the project “Take Time to Listen,” take a few moments to share your experience. Why did you choose the person you interviewed? Which of their answers resonated with you? Which of their answers surprised you?

Think about the importance of context. Have your words ever been taken out of context? Did this situation affect any of your relationships? How was the situation resolved?

Read Luke 10:25-42. What role do you think this story plays in the larger narrative of Luke’s Gospel?

Discuss some of the projects you worked on in this chapter. How did God transform you through them? How did they help you better understand the story, yourself, others, and the world around you?

TRANSFORMATION QUESTIONS

Small Groups