

**IT'S NOT
WHAT YOU
THINK**

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

WHY CHRISTIANITY IS ABOUT SO MUCH MORE
THAN GOING TO HEAVEN WHEN YOU DIE

Jefferson Bethke



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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*For Kinsley I pray you come to know this beautiful
and life-giving Jesus as the pursuit of your entire
life. Daddy and Mommy love you so much.*

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INTRODUCTION

**LIVING IN
COLOR**

IF YOU WENT TO A PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL, YOU PROBABLY read a few classics for English class. I remember reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men*, among others. Hands down though my favorite novel was Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (which was recently made into a movie).

If you're not familiar with it, the basic premise is that an entire society is controlled by a group of elders who set up a system that strips all choices and emotions from humans' lives. Each human is forced to take an injection every morning that takes away these things.

Both the book and the movie communicate this is by everyone living and seeing only black and white as the normal standard. There's no color, no life, no joy. But because of the injections, and because *everyone* takes them, they don't know that's not normal. They believe the world is black and white, and that it's devoid of colors and the blessings that come with them, and it's simply the way to live.

The main character, Jonas, starts to dream and have faint visions in color. He couldn't even describe what he thought he saw, but when he stops taking his injections fully, *everything* begins

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to show up in color. It's so radically life giving and beautiful, he doesn't have language for what he's seeing. It's too vibrant and hypnotizing. Nothing changed about the world he is living in, except now his eyes have become able to perceive what was always there. He quickly and clearly realizes the world wasn't what he thought.

I believe the Western church has been seeing the world in black and white for some time, but we don't even realize it, not unlike the characters in *The Giver*. This has been caused by us forming Jesus in our own image, rather than letting Jesus form us in his image. We have domesticated, Westernized, neutered, and all together changed Jesus to an eternal Mr. Potato Head—ripping off the parts we don't like and adding what we think seems right.

Recently, in my own study and journey with Jesus and the Scriptures, I started to realize there are certain things about the first-century world that make Jesus and the Scriptures more vibrant, beautiful, and compelling. When you understand his world, you begin to understand him. There are things that make no sense to us because we don't know what it was like to be a first-century rabbi or a Jew living in Judea under Roman rule.

But when we enter into the world of Jesus, and take him for who he was, the Bible begins to turn to color. Details we haven't noticed before jump out at us. Neither the Bible nor Jesus change; but stepping back into the first century gives us new eyes to see who he was, what he did, and why we are still talking about him today.

I hope through these pages you might begin to see Jesus more vibrantly yourself. I'm not a pastor or theologian, and I don't have numerous degrees where people need to call me Doctor or

Professor Bethke. But over the past couple of years I've fallen more in love with Jesus and the story of God and his church by unclicking the mute button twenty-first-century Westerners have put on first-century Jesus and by letting him speak on his own.

Every morning as I walk with Jesus, I ask him to open our eyes more and more each day. Because when we see Jesus clearly, then we can follow him.

One of the scariest questions we have to ask ourselves is, what if we aren't seeing Jesus properly? What implication does that have for our lives? What if Jesus isn't who we think? I believe he's always catching us off guard, creatively challenging us, pursuing us, and loving us.

I've written these pages as someone who—like you—is on a journey to see Jesus more vibrant, alive, and for who he truly is more and more each day. Will you join me?

CHAPTER ONE

YOUR STORY'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

LOVE DEFINED YOU BEFORE
ANYTHING ELSE DID

CHRISTIANITY IS A BOUNCED CHECK TO MY GENERATION.

We heard the promises, the value of “coming to Jesus”—payouts such as a better life and no more problems—but when we went to cash in on those promises, nothing deposited. The investment didn’t deliver what it said it would deliver. So we put our trust into things that did (or at least felt like it).

I still remember when I first started truly following Jesus my freshman year of college, and began to go to church with a whole new perspective. I wanted to learn more about Jesus, but I found myself dreading going every week. The church I was attending frequently put the perfect, shiny-rainbow Jesus follower onstage, who made me feel even worse. Half the time I was expecting an angel to fly over the stage with Handel’s *Messiah* playing from the clouds.

During what was called “testimony time,” someone would be invited to share for a few minutes about his or her life before and after Jesus. Usually they’d say something like, “I was an alcoholic for forty years and struggled every day with no hope. I gave my life to Jesus and have never thought about a drop since.”

While many people have that type of story, I don’t. So every

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time I'd hear testimonies like that, I'd sink deeper into my chair and look around, wondering if anyone felt the same. Was I the only one who didn't have that kind of experience?¹ Was there something wrong with me? Did God not love me? Did I mess up and not become "Christian" enough?

Because when I started following Jesus, things actually got harder. I had a long season of depression. Things in my life started to go poorly. Relationships broke. Addictions stayed. I knew I didn't want to live for myself, or listen to the fleshy desires in me, but they still called me and lured me more. I felt I had no place in Christianity.

When I was a kid, the Christianity I saw never really gave much space to struggle, fail, or ask for help. Growing up in the '90s and coming of age in the beginning of the twenty-first century was a really peculiar place to be. It's as if we are in the middle of that monumental shift from Christianity being the law of the land to now becoming adamantly opposed. How'd we get here?

Western Christianity today is a weird stew of some biblical teachings and some gnostic principles, in a heavy modern enlightenment foundation with a Jesus sticker slapped on it. And sadly that combination leads to erosion, decay, and a Christianity that is honestly neither fulfilling nor enticing. In fact, it's pretty lifeless. It's not a compelling story because it's usually not a story at all. It's a formula, or facts, or a math equation.

But what if there is a better way? I truly believe Jesus tells a better story.

In order for Christianity to start fresh, we have to start with the gospel.

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My first memorable encounter with the gospel was when I was in middle school. All around me other middle school kids were crying and hardly anyone was standing. It was a powerful moment—so much so that even now when I think about it, a range of emotions comes over me.

I was at a Christian youth camp.

It was the last night of that camp when everyone “asked Jesus into their hearts.” The piano was playing softly while the camp speaker asked all the kids to bow their heads and close their eyes. He would then say, “Okay, whoever wants to receive Jesus, repeat after me. . . .”

Sound familiar? Welcome to 1990s evangelicalism.

Considering how common that experience was for people back then, there’s something that has always struck me: *Why is it that a similar situation, when read as if it were part of the gospel narrative, feels weird or off base?*

Imagine you pick up the Gospel of Luke, and you see a bunch of red letters (the words of Jesus). You start reading those red letters, and it says, “All righty, everyone, bow your heads and close your eyes. The worship leader is going to come play some soft piano music behind me, and if you think you want to follow me, just put your hand in the sky. Don’t worry: no one is looking.” And when someone raises his hand, Jesus says, “I see your hand; God sees your heart.”

It’s almost comical, isn’t it? Jesus’ exhortations to his listeners were almost exactly the opposite. His declaration to follow him bled grace—to the point of bleeding himself—but in that grace he said, “*Follow me.*” The abandon, the unknown, the reference

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to a first-century torture device, all crashed into that two-word phrase, *follow me*. We privatize our faith, when Jesus calls us to follow him publicly.

How did we get so far off base? How come our gospel doesn't really seem much like Jesus' gospel?

Here's a scarier question: at what point is a religion only wrong in a few areas but still the same belief system, and at what point is a religion so unrecognizable to its founders they'd call it a different religion entirely? Have we reached that point in Western Christianity?

I can't help but look at the Scriptures and the Christianity I've lived and breathed most of my life and think, *Really? Is this it? What happened?* The truth is, we are living in a really, really bad story. And a lot of us are not only living in it, but telling others, "If you come to Jesus, you can escape this world." (Yet didn't Jesus say he came to restore this world?)

When I was a kid, this thing called *heaven* was always spoken of as somewhere far away up in the sky. I always imagined heaven being a place far, far away with winged babies playing harps and floating on the clouds. Now honestly, that doesn't sound like a place where I want to be for eternity. It sounds terrible and boring. In fact, if I ever saw a naked chubby baby with wings, I'd probably run as fast as I could the other way; I wouldn't say, "Oh, I sure want to go there when I die." What if there's *better* news than the good news that Christians are going to heaven when we die? What if God wants to give us heaven right here? In our families? Our jobs? Our meals? Our art?

Another bad story a lot of Christians live in is what I call

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“Cliffs Notes Christianity.” It usually begins the story with Jesus: Jesus came to show you your sin, die for your sin, resurrect, and float off into heaven. It’s a sterile, clean, plastic Jesus. It’s the Christianity of show. It’s nice, tidy—a neat package with a perfect bow on it. But walking with Jesus is way messier than that, like all of life truly is.

The problem with a Cliff Notes faith is we are disregarding the very story Jesus himself believed and lived! It starts with the New Testament and leaves out the fact that Jesus himself only had Genesis to Malachi as his Bible (or his story).

Many of us, without knowing it, rip Jesus’ Jewishness right out of the story. But it’s his Jewishness that informs the gospels and the story of Jesus himself. Jesus was a Jew and a rabbi. He probably had the Torah (first five books of the Bible) memorized, if not the entire Tanakh (Old Testament). The Old Testament is a lengthy, weaving, extensive collection of texts that seem to end without delivering what they all call for—a Messiah. A lot of us often skip from Genesis right to Matthew, leaving Israel’s story in the dust. There’s a reason Jesus didn’t come in Genesis 4, but instead in Matthew 1. Jesus is the climax of the story, not the introduction.

If you can tell the gospel—or the story—of Jesus without even mentioning the story of Israel, it’s probably not really the gospel, or at least not a full one.

So what story are you walking in? What’s the plot? Who’s the main character? What’s the goal?

We all have answers to those questions whether or not we know them. To many Westerners, the plot is that life has no

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meaning and so you may as well enjoy it while you can. The main character is myself. And the goal is to enjoy it—gain as much as possible, as easily as possible, with as little pain as possible. When I was in college, this was basically the story every one of my friends was living in.

Others live in a story that is driving toward Utopia. It's about continuing out of primitive religions, philosophies, and ideas, and making the world a better place one step at a time. Sadly, they don't realize that the most "advanced" full century we've ever lived in, the twentieth century, is also on record as the bloodiest. It seems enlightenment of ideas and philosophy aren't going to achieve a utopia.

So what's the true story? Which is the best story?

The truth is, Christians have the greatest story ever told, but we aren't telling it.

The crucial left turn Christians often make when telling our story starts with the first three chapters of the very first book in the Bible—Genesis.

Genesis is a deeply beautiful, poetic, rhythmic, powerful book.
"In the beginning . . ."

Quite a start, right? Not, "Let me tell you some facts, theories, and abstract truths," but, "Let me tell you a *story*."

Yet as Christians we often miss what's going on in the very first chapters of the very first book of the Bible. Many Christians don't even read Genesis 1–2 unless they need an offensive weapon against evolutionists. Because of this, many start their functional Bible in Genesis 3, especially when presenting the good news of Jesus.

This is evident in the "gospel bracelet" that has six different

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colors to help navigate the American gospel story. (And I say “American” because it breaks down the gospel in a Western, modern, abstract truth way that would have been foreign to Jesus.) The problem with those bracelets, though, is most of them start with the color *black*. If you’ve ever seen one, the order they usually take is similar to below.

- Black for sin
- Red for blood
- Blue for baptism
- White for cleansing
- Green for growth
- Yellow for heaven

I used to wear one of these bracelets and could “take people through it” like they were on some type of assembly line.² But there’s something strange about those six steps. I’d contend that this “gospel” is a large reason for much of the distortion, malnutrition, condemnation, and lack of true healing and freedom in the church today.

The problem is, it starts with black. The bracelet’s story *starts* with sin. That’s like trying to build a house on rot. We want to tell people Jesus is the best thing ever, and the first thing we tell them is they are horrible and sinful and wretched. We are literally training people to start the “good news” with horrendously terrible news: “Hi, my name is Jeff. Can I talk to you for a second? You are a sinner.”

Some of you might ask, “What’s the problem? Isn’t it true?”

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Yes, it's true, we are broken, but even though it's true, it doesn't mean that's where God *starts* the story.

Starting the story with sin is like starting *The Chronicles of Narnia* with Edmund's capture by the White Witch. Or imagine the first page of *Where the Wild Things Are* already has Max in the jungle environment with the beasts. You probably wouldn't even know he was dreaming! Where you start a story drastically changes how you perceive that story.

Stories have a flow and an arc, a beginning and an end. When reading an encyclopedia or a dictionary, we can flip to any spot and get information, but when reading a story, we need to follow the narrative.

So if Genesis doesn't start in Genesis 3, why would we start there when telling it?

My point is this: black represents Genesis 3. It represents the point in the human story when we stage a coup d'état on God's throne and have been doing so ever since.

It's as if we're saying, "You're not God; I am. You don't know what's right and wrong; I do. I know you've given me the very oxygen in my lungs that allows me to live, but step aside. I can take it from here."

When we begin with sin, we feel spiritually and emotionally naked. Shame, guilt, and condemnation distort our beings at the truest level. Things don't work how they are supposed to work. We know something is broken, amiss.

But that's not where the story starts.

Any reading of ancient Jewish thought would show the first two chapters of Genesis were critical to their worldview and to

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Jesus'. These were the very chapters that concreted their very radical notion of monotheism, which was and still is a pillar of Jewish thought—one God over all creation, as opposed to many other societies at the time of ancient Israel who believed in regional gods of the sun, moon, crops, among others.

And the first couple of chapters of Genesis are beautifully written. God makes order, beauty, and meaning out of chaos. Before God touched his finger to creation, it says it was *tohu va bohu*, which literally means “void and empty.” But God starts making stuff, starts bringing beauty.

If you've ever seen a painter at work in his studio or a carpenter making something beautiful out of the best cuts of wood there are, you can only imagine the scene when God created *everything*.

And he just won't stop. Animals, stars, flowers, water, and land. And then, as the crowning act of creation, he makes two image-bearers—male and female—and puts them into the garden to reflect, cultivate, and steward. He points them to the cultivated part of the garden where everything has been made right and tells them to make the rest of the world look like that.

Talk about a story! The joy, elation, and mystery to be there in the beginning. Purpose, love, marriage, intimacy—it's all there.

So the question arises, why don't we start there? Why not tell that story?

Are you a Genesis 1 Christian or a Genesis 3 Christian?

Do you start your story with *shalom* or with sin?

Shalom is the Hebrew word for “peace.” For rhythm. For everything lining up exactly how it was meant to line up.

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Shalom is happening in those moments when you are at the dinner table for hours with good friends, good food, and good wine.

Shalom is when you hear or see something and can't quite explain it, but you know it's calling and stirring something deep inside of you.

Shalom is a sunset, that sense of exhaustion yet satisfaction from a hard day's work, creating art that is bigger than itself.

Shalom is enemies being reconciled by love.

Shalom is when you are dancing to the rhythm of God's voice.

And in Genesis 1, *everything* was Shalom. It was shouting out of every square inch of the creation and exploding in every molecule in God's good earth. It was a crashingly loud symphony coming through the best surround-sound system you've ever encountered, hitting you from all angles at the peak of intensity. Yet now it's a dying whisper, a fractured song, a broken melody, only brought back into the right key at the feet of Jesus.

Genesis 1 Christians start the story with an appeal to the fact that all human beings on earth have inherent worth and value because they were brought to life by God's very own breath. They are living creatures standing in the gap between Creator and the rest of creation. All of creation God *spoke* into existence, but with us it said we were *formed*.

God got particular and creative with us human creatures. He rolled up his sleeves when he made us and declared us to be *Imago Dei*. *Image of God*. He did not call us broken, sinner, or failure.³ Which means our *primal* identity (the one most at the depths of who we are—in our very bones) is one given by the Creator

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himself. We are his. Do you believe that? The first voice over you was image of God.

While it is true that after Genesis 3 we are sinners, we are still made in the image of God, no matter how broken that image is. Beauty is more primal than the curse; and we were children before we were runaways.⁴

Think about it: when a temple gets destroyed, and there is just rubble and remains on the ground, it is still a temple. A broken, cracked, messed up temple, yes, but it's still a temple. Its primal identity doesn't change. It didn't magically turn into an apartment building or a deli when it crumbled. It's a broken temple that has no hope of fixing itself and is in need of massive restoration from the ground up—but it's still a temple. So it is with us. When we start in Genesis 1, we tell a story that is more beautiful and much bigger than most Christians today tell, a story that needs to be heard by the world. We don't have a hard time realizing how messed up we are. I know I'm broken. I know I'm deeply flawed. I know I'm not good enough. You don't need to shout those things out at me from the corner of the street with your sandwich board—I *already know them*.

But you tell me I have inherent worth and value based on who made me, not what I do and I think, *Really? Are you sure? But . . .*

That's subversive. In a culture that continually strips humans of dignity (homelessness, exploitation of poor, objectifying women, abortion, euthanasia, and so forth), we have to return to *shalom*. We have to return to that special declaration God shouted over humans thousands of years ago in that wonderful garden—"So God created man in his *own* image."⁵

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It doesn't matter how hard you scrub, in this life you can't get the image of God fully off of you.

Now from a personal to cosmic level, there is another vital distinction in making sure you start where God starts the story. When you start the story in Genesis 3, personal sin is the biggest problem in the world. Sin management is the problem and Jesus arrives simply to pay for your sin.⁶

The world doesn't matter. Creation doesn't matter. Only we matter because in Genesis 3 the story zooms in on the human condition. Now is that true? Of course, but it's not *all* of the truth. When you start in Genesis 1, you start with shalom not just of humans but of all creation. When God created the world it had perfect peace. There was this beautiful dance that the trees, the animals, the water, the sun, very orbit, the rhythms of life, and the living creatures Adam and Eve were all doing. No one missed a step.

But when sin came into the world it fractured that dance, broke the rhythm, stopped the symphony. Creation stopped playing Beethoven's symphonies and started sounding more like sixth-grade me trying to learn my first note on the trombone. My mom didn't say, "*Oh, that's so beautiful.*" She probably plugged her ears most of the time. It was *off*. And broken.

But when you start with the creation of all things as good because that's exactly what God said about them (food, music, relationships, beauty, and all of heaven and earth being flooded with God's presence), then the answer instead isn't sin management but restoration of all things. God is putting his world back together, and to do that he's using the very people who broke it.

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The level of reconciliation and restoration goes way deeper. God is recreating and remaking *everything* in the person and work of Jesus, and you can only get that when you get he cares about all that in the first place (Genesis 1–2). Jesus declared a new world was bursting forth right here in the midst of the old one, and you can't get that unless you know the whole world needs restoring. Some people say this way of explaining and understanding the gospel message is taking sin lightly, but I'd argue the exact opposite. What makes sin bigger? Humans being affected by it, or the whole world (including humans) being affected by it? And when sin is that big, it makes what Jesus accomplished even bigger.

How we understand this comes back to how we see the Bible. If we don't see it as a narrative, we won't tell it as one. And if we don't believe God loves us for who we are even before we ask to be forgiven, then we won't really even care to hear—let alone believe—his words.

HOW YOU SEE THE BIBLE SHAPES YOUR VIEW OF GOD

One of my favorite things my sweet wife, Alyssa, does, began before we were married. Whenever I go on a trip, she writes me notes of encouragement, one for every day I'm gone. I hardly make it to the airport before opening *all of them* all at once.

I can't help myself. They bring me so much joy, life, and encouragement that I want to read them all in one sitting. (I was also that kid who begged my parents to let me open my presents two weeks before Christmas. Patience is obviously a virtue I hold

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innately.) I'm so antsy to read them all because I truly believe Alyssa loves me, is all for my joy, encourages me, and cares about me. If this weren't the case, I wouldn't be tempted to read them. We are more inclined to read someone's words when we believe those words are there because they care for us.

Do you really believe God loves you? Admittedly, the word *love* is a little fuzzy and overused in our culture. How about, do you believe God *likes* you? Delights in you? Knows you? Dances because of you? Because if you do, then I have a feeling that motivation to pick up his grand narrative called the Bible won't be that big of a problem.

I've seen a lot of books or blogs on how to study or read the Bible. You can use all the techniques in the world, but if you think God is burdened by you, is aloof, or doesn't care about you, then you'll be predisposed to have a distorted lens in which you view him right from the beginning.

So what lens do you see the Bible through? A road map to life? A sword? A collection of stories? Even though you probably don't think so, the answer to that question has cosmic implications. Your answer to that question ultimately gives you a very specific view of God and your role as someone under him.

For example, a common metaphor in the Christian world is that the Bible is the "sword of the Spirit." The writer of Ephesians (6:17) uses the imagery of a sword to explain God's word has an edge to it; it's sharp and can create things. It can cut deep. It has power. It divides between soul and spirit, bone and marrow.

But if you see the Scriptures only as a "sword," it says something very specific about God. It projects that he is nothing more

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than a sergeant or captain who has commissioned us to fight in a war. And if God is a captain of an army, then that makes us soldiers. Of course sword imagery is used in the Scriptures, but it's not the ultimate narrative. We don't see it in Creation, the history of Israel, or the words of Jesus.

In fact, it's only used on a few occasions to convey a special aspect of the Christian life. So it's a subnarrative (meaning it's true, and it's there) but it's an illustration used to serve a greater narrative. The word *soldier* isn't used nearly as often as *bride* or *child*. When elevated to the level of the ultimate theme of the Bible, elevating subnarratives to a primary status can distort the truth and create those groups of people you see wielding their "swords," quoting verses about "those" evil people, and creating an us-versus-them culture.

Another lens some people use is seeing the Bible as a moral compass listing precepts we should follow. The problem with that is a lot of parts of the Bible are certainly things we don't want to follow. There is murder, adultery, rape, incest, and a whole slew of terrible things. One way I heard a pastor say it that helps me, is that the Bible is *descriptive* not *prescriptive*. It's mainly about how God relates to a broken and rebellious human race, and in the midst of that narrative he gives some precepts and ways to live.

Still others view the Bible as nothing more than a road map for life. Of course the Bible does contain some specific guidelines; Proverbs is nothing but advice given to the young as they embark on the world. But we have to admit the Bible is not the user-friendly manual we would choose. It doesn't tell us what colleges to attend, what person to marry, or what jobs to take. It does have

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razor-sharp focus on God's ultimate will being that we follow him, live humbly, seek justice, and be obedient.

When you view the Bible as your personal road map, you can't help but create a God who is a blend of Santa Claus and the magic eight ball. He exists to satisfy your desires, answer your specific questions, and give you exact details about who he wants you to marry or what school he wants you to go to. This view of the Bible places you as the center of the story. The world is revolving around you, and God is present as butler not Lord.

There are plenty of examples of the Bible through different lenses. And while each view isn't completely wrong as a subnarrative, the problem comes when we often give those distortions the ultimate importance rather than seeing them as simply pieces of the pie.

Remember, the Bible is sixty-six books and letters, written by almost forty different authors, and spanning more than thirty-five hundred years. Among the authors are kings, prophets, apostles, and shepherds. Imagine one letter written by President John F. Kennedy and another letter written by a fifth-century peasant. There would be enormous differences in the cultural, sociological, and philosophical frameworks they were operating in. And that's the beauty of the Scriptures. It's full of songs, histories, genealogies, and letters that have brought hope to millions down the ages, written from many different perspectives, different lenses, different subnarratives.

With that in mind, the best way to view Scripture as a whole is as a *story*—a long story that is full of the bumps and bruises, twists and turns, plotlines, character development, climaxes,

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and conclusions every story should have. The narrative thread that ties these diverse texts together is God's rescue operation of this thing called humanity. The Creation account, the Law, the Prophets, the songs, the Gospels, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation all tell the same story—how the Creator God (Jesus) brought about (and is still bringing about) new creations despite our rebellion, sin, and cosmic treason.

The Bible is about God—specifically about how God became King of the world. In Genesis, God created us, so he could dwell with us and be our God. In the Old Testament the mission of God *dwelling* with us is central.

- The Old Testament is all about what it will ultimately look like when God becomes King and restores this world.
- The Gospels are about what it looks like when God actually becomes King.
- The Epistles are about how to live in light of God being King.
- And Revelation is about the finality or conclusion where God is King and everything is in Shalom (Hebrew for peace, rhythm, etc.) as he intended in the first place.

And when we view the Scriptures as a story—more important, this specific story—we see our own roles *in* the story. We aren't at the center. We aren't on the main stage. The spotlight isn't on us. God created us to co-create with him. To co-labor in

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the task he commissioned to us. We aren't the story, but we are *in* the story!

THE GRAND NARRATIVE WITH GOD AT THE CENTER

Ultimately the Bible isn't about us, and that's good news.

Have you ever gone to a movie just to watch the extras? No one does that. Personally, I go to any movie Denzel Washington or Will Smith is in. I don't care what it's about. If one of them is in it, I see it.

But imagine watching one of Denzel's movies when, during a close-up of his face, you see something strange in the background. You squint because it's fuzzy and blurry. Soon, though, it becomes obvious it's an extra in the movie, flailing his arms, trying to distract from the scene. The extra wants the spotlight. That would be incredibly weird.

That doesn't ever happen because the movie is about Denzel's character (and that scene wouldn't make it past the final edit). When the extra plays his small role well, acting as a tool pointing moviegoers toward the main story (which, if he does his job properly he goes unnoticed) then the film flows perfectly.

That's us with God. We are in *his* story, his redemption and rescue operation. He is King. He is Lord. He is on the throne. And when we live our lives pointing to ourselves, we look just as stupid as an extra in the background flailing his arms during his three-second spot on camera.

We need to make sure we read the Bible as a *story*. After all, it's the greatest story ever told. It's the reason we all feel a whisper

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in our hearts every time we read a good story. It's a signpost pointing to the one all of us are in. A wonderful kingdom narrative with God at the center.

But, in Christianity, oftentimes, we tell a really bad story like the static testimonies onstage I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter ("I was bad, I found Jesus, now my life is perfect."). Or, we don't tell a story at all. We tell facts. Facts devoid of story. Devoid of life. Devoid of personality.

But the truth is story is the language and currency of the world.

Don't believe me? Try to remember highlights from the last sermon you heard, then try to remember the premise of the last movie you saw. My guess is the latter is best remembered. Sadly, today's sermons often aren't a beautiful art of storytelling like they used to be; rather, they are encyclopedic regurgitations of facts devoid of skin. That type of language doesn't sink in, doesn't resonate, doesn't make our heart beat. A good movie, on the other hand, can draw you into another life and take you places.

When someone recites, "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation," most Americans immediately recognize the Gettysburg Address. In one of the most famous speeches of all time, Abraham Lincoln, in just fifteen words, started to tell a story. About our nation. Our history. Characters, timeline, plot, and problem—they're all there. And it deeply strikes us.

One of my favorite movies is *Amistad*. It's an incredibly gritty and raw look at slavery and Western imperialism. In one scene President John Quincy Adams is asked for advice in regards to the court case defense. Adams says, "When I was an attorney, a

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long time ago, . . . I realized, after much trial and error, that in the courtroom, *whoever tells the best story wins.*"⁷

If we want our neighbors, our coworkers, and our family to think about Jesus differently, it's time we start telling a better story. *Whoever tells the best story wins.* As theologian N. T. Wright put it,

Most Western churches have simply forgotten what the Gospel message is all about, and what the Bible, seen as a whole, is all about: that this is the story of how the Creator God launched his rescue operation for the whole of creation. As a result, the great narrative the Bible offers has been shrunk, by generations of devout preachers and teachers, to the much smaller narrative of "me and God getting together," as though the whole thing—creation Abraham, Moses, David, the early church, and not least the Gospel themselves—were simply a gigantic set of apparent authorities teaching about how unbelievers come to faith, how sinners get saved, and how people's lives get turned around. Of course, the Bible includes plenty about all that, but it includes within the much larger story of creation and cosmos, covenant God and covenant people—the single narrative that, according to all four gospels, reaches its climax with Jesus.⁸

We are trained to rip the story right out and are left with a skeleton of facts and truths that have no personal connection. There is something innate in the Western mind-set that gravitates much more toward assembly line information rather than creativity and beauty.

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Sir Ken Robinson, an expert on education reform, describes how we are training ourselves to abandon story and creativity. Writing about divergent thinking (the ability to think of multiple possibilities out of the box), he notes a famous study where he gives kindergarten students one paper clip each and asks them to think of as many uses for it as they can. The study was re-administered to the same kids every three to five years until they graduated from high school.

Of the fifteen hundred students, how many scored at the genius level for divergent thinking as kindergarteners? Ninety-eight percent.

Every time the test was re-administered, the percentage of geniuses dropped. This is fascinating. You'd think children would improve at problem solving and innovation, especially in an educational system. "But one of the most important things happened that I'm convinced [*sic*] is that by now they've become educated. They spend ten years in school being told there is one answer, it's at the back, and don't look—and don't copy because that's cheating."⁹

I can't help but think of some church circles. We don't realize our industrial revolution and assembly-line mentality has crept into the church, virtually stealing people's creativity and sense of wonder. We go around saying, "You need to be born again." And to the next person: "You need to be born again." And to the next person: "Yeah, you also need to be born again." We industrialize and assembly line salvation. Just give me the formula!

But guess what? Jesus doesn't like formulas. Even that phrase *born again* was only mentioned once by Jesus in Scripture.¹⁰

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In the very next story in John, Jesus tells a woman she needs to drink of the fount of living water and stop trying to satisfy her thirst other places.

Jesus was creative and made a habit of meeting people right where they were. Like a doctor, he prescribed exactly what was needed in that moment. By the way, the first story was a religious man who thought he was “good to go” because he had been *born* into the family of Abraham. In the next story, Jesus sat at a well and explained to a woman that well water doesn’t satisfy an eternal thirst.

What if we taught people to eat, drink, and breathe the story of the Scriptures? To see their own stories within the big story? To tell a better story than the world’s narrative?

The fascinating thing is that there is some good science to show; this is how God meant for us to learn truth, in story.

A recent study showed that the right-brain hemisphere—the one that controls creativity, story, and art—is wired and designed to receive and compute information before the left-brain hemisphere—the logical side that controls analysis and understanding. Meaning, we were created to take in the big picture and engage on all senses through art and beauty before we go hash it all out.

Instead, letting our left brains take the lead, according to N. T. Wright, is the “cultural equivalent of schizophrenia. But these assumptions run deep in today’s world, and they have radically conditioned the way we approach everything, including not least the Bible.”¹¹

No wonder Jesus didn’t have his disciples sit down at desks, with him at the whiteboard.

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Jesus' followers walked with him. And while they walked, he told stories—stories of sheep, lost coins, wedding banquets, different types of soils, a rich man and a poor man, two lost sons, someone coming knocking at midnight, and so on.

Jesus is the most creative, dynamic, and alluring teacher to ever walk this earth, and we relegate him to the mantle of our fireplace. No one's words explode with more power and draw out more wonder and awe than those of this first-century man from Nazareth, yet we prefer to give someone four spiritual laws or the Romans Road.¹²

It's about time we stop with the formulas and start with the truth and beauty of story.

We have the greatest story ever told, so let's start living in it and let's start telling it.