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# story: a new way to see

*"Story changes everything. Identify yourself as a storyteller, an artist committed to narrative, and you'll experience God and your life more deeply than you did before."*

**The idea of this book** is that story is a great tool for helping us understand life and faith. But when we read parts of the Bible that aren't narratives, such as the New Testament epistles, the story lens still proves meaningful. Peter and Paul were real people with stories, writing letters to real people they loved, urging them to live better stories. Knowing these men's biographies helps us better appreciate the weight and integrity of their words.

## REAL PEOPLE

It may sound like good advice when Peter writes, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."[1] But when we consider the man who composed those words, we know it's more than a platitude waiting to be cross-stitched on a decorative pillow. We know he made his share of mistakes as a disciple of Christ, and we know he denied knowing Jesus three times following Judas's betrayal. We know Peter was gently restored to service by the risen Christ, and we know he preached boldly on the day of Pentecost. We know his leadership was vital to the

early church, and credible tradition tells us Peter died for his faith at the hands of Nero's goons.

When that man, with that story, tells me to give my anxiety to the God who cares for me, I'm listening.

Knowing Paul's story from Acts and the places in his letters where he offered up bits of his biography, we know the man went through a lot (e.g., 2 Corinthians 11:24–27). When he wrote, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8–9), we know he wasn't indulging in hyperbole. Thus when Paul teaches about love (1 Corinthians 13), perseverance (Romans 5:4), and the surpassing joy of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8), his story undergirds his words. Even in the epistles we find a story at work—real people writing to real people, guiding them in their pursuit of a real God.

## THE SCHEMER'S LIMP

There's a man in the Bible named Jacob—do you know who I'm talking about? Jacob is the one who covered his smooth hands with goatskins in order to deceive his blind, elderly father, Isaac, into believing he was his exceptionally swarthy brother, Esau. No, really, read it for yourself in Genesis 27. Jacob tricked his father into giving him the blessing as the firstborn, leaving Esau with the short end of the paternal blessing stick.

A few chapters later, in Genesis 32, Jacob is afraid for his life. Esau isn't just hairy, he's murderously angry and determined to get revenge on Jacob. At this point, Jacob knows a showdown with Esau is inevitable, and he doesn't appear to like his chances. Instead, he sends out livestock and messengers in hopes of appeasing Esau and negotiating some sort of truce.

It's in the midst of all this that Jacob finds himself alone one night, having divided up all his assets and sent them away. Sud-

denly, Jacob finds himself wrestling an unknown opponent until dawn. I'll let *The Message* take it from here:

> **When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.**
>
> **The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."**
>
> **Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."**
>
> **The man said, "What's your name?"**
>
> **He answered, "Jacob."**
>
> **The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."**
>
> **Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"**
>
> **The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.**
>
> **Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"**
>
> **The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.**[2]

I don't fully understand what this story means, and I'm not sure Jacob did either, but I fully understand that it's meaningful. Jacob was a schemer—first he'd duped his brother Esau out of his birthright for a pot of soup, and then duped Isaac out of Esau's blessing. Jacob was on the run, desperate and doing what he could to assuage Esau's wrath.

Then, apropos of nothing, this mysterious midnight wrestler appears. Their struggle concludes with some hip-dislocating mojo, and Jacob leaves a changed man. For one thing, he has a limp (rarely a sign of honor). For another thing, he has a new name: Israel. And finally, he has a new attitude. When he and Esau meet again, Israel the Limper (formerly Jacob the Schemer) is determined to *give* to

his brother rather than *take* from him. "God has been good to me," Israel insists, "and I have more than enough."[3]

I don't tell you this story so that you'll be persuaded to wreak havoc in your family, wrestle a stranger, and limp your way into reconciliation. This is not, as near as I can tell, an ordained formula for bettering the human experience. I tell you this story because God chose to tell us this story. I tell you this story because it's a good story. This is a story in which a flawed human being is confronted with the consequences of his choices, is confronted with the reality of God, and is somehow redeemed through an encounter that seems, if you don't mind my saying, utterly fantastical.

In this story I see conflict, mystery, redemption, hope, and transformation. I see God's presence in the strife and striving of His people. I see an acknowledgment of the value of story in Jacob's commemoration of the narrative. Remember, he gave the place a name that meant "God's Face" because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!" He lived to tell the story, and tell the story is exactly what he did.

## THE "MANUAL"? OR THE "STORY"?

Even if you go to church every Sunday, it may have been awhile since you heard a preacher or teacher tell a good story. For many of us, exploring the Bible and pursuing spiritual growth are increasingly driven by the practice of extracting and identifying principles for better living. Sometimes these principles even start with the same letter (e.g., Faith, Family, Fellowship, and Follow-Up). But for all their good intentions, these principles rarely compel the kind of life change they promise. We return the next week, hungry once again, hoping the principles will stick to our ribs this time. The truth is that it doesn't have to be this way. Jesus didn't call us to a Principle Driven Life, but rather to His gospel, the Good News, a story that ushers in a kingdom.

I've often wondered how many people, if we snuck truth serum into their morning coffee, would admit to being annoyed by all the narrative in the Bible. Particularly the Old Testament, which kicks off with "In the beginning" and doesn't take a break from story until Leviticus begins ninety chapters later. I wonder if when we read these stories we're conditioned to leapfrog from one doctrine or principle to another: "Seven-day creation . . . skip ahead . . . original sin . . . skip ahead . . . Abrahamic covenant . . . skip ahead . . ." and so on.

Perhaps this is because we enjoy the comfort and convenience of a Christianity that squares nicely with PowerPoint templates. And yet the Bible, in its raw and undomesticated state, doesn't look anything like a slide deck full of bullet points and bar graphs, does it? Ironically, we who espouse a "high view of Scripture" often seem dead set on making the Bible what we want it to be.

A former Sunday school teacher of mine, a man for whom I have the utmost respect, carried a Bible on which he'd had the words "The Manual" embossed on the spine. I suppose this makes some sense because the Bible contains indispensable insights and applications for life. Also, this man spent the first half of his professional life as an engineer of some sort, so he was likely predisposed to see the world in terms of complicated processes and machinery that required the ultimate manual. But does "The Manual" really fit?

> If I had to get a new label embossed on the spine of my Bible, I think I'd choose "The Story."

I don't know that Isaiah, Daniel, Job, or Jonah would apply that label to the books that bear their names. Some of the psalms are instructive, but even their form is often more artful than informational. While we find books that are predominantly instructive,

such as Proverbs or James, they're hardly as exhaustive as we'd expect from a proper manual. Neither are they structured to guide us step-by-step through life, but you get the point.

I've spent more than a decade thinking about "The Manual" and attempting to articulate my unease with it. As labels go, I think I prefer some variation of the standard *Holy Bible* or "the Word of God." But if I had to get a new label embossed on the spine of my Bible (yes, I realize this is an odd hypothetical), something I believed more accurately conveyed the contents of the book, I think I'd choose "The Story."

## A CHARACTER WHO WANTS SOMETHING

Before we go any further, we should probably define our terms. Robert McKee is the authority on American screenwriting and the author of *Story,* his guide to the craft of storytelling. Although *Story* is more than four hundred pages long, McKee doesn't dwell on a definition of story—he moves from a brief romantic philosophy of storytelling into an exhaustive, methodical exposition of its elements. But early on he does offer us this:

"A story is simply one huge master event," he writes. "When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the *arc of the film,* the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end. This final condition, the end change, must be *absolute* and *irreversible*."[4]

In *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years,* Donald Miller recounts the experience of attending McKee's Story seminar with his friend Jordan. After thirty-six hours of lecture and pages upon pages of notes, it was Jordan who finally offered an accessible definition of story: "A story is a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it."[5] That's a definition we can get our arms around,

and as Miller explores to great effect in his book, it's a definition we can observe at work in compelling stories and lives.

In terms of simplicity, Kurt Vonnegut's description of classic story structure—"Man in Hole"—can't be beat. As you might imagine, this means a story is what happens when a man falls in a hole, and then tries to climb out. Of course, "the story needn't be about a man or a hole," Vonnegut said.[6] Rather, the hole could be grief, injury, unrequited love, or a city bus rigged to explode if the speedometer dips below 55 miles per hour.

In any of these definitions or classifications, story is about pursuit. Story is movement by a character or group of characters from one point (physical, emotional, or otherwise) to another point. A story is progress, action toward an outcome. Characters without this pursuit do not make for a story. A conversation is not a story. A movie about characters who don't progress toward anything would be the equivalent of security footage from an uneventful day inside a shopping mall. "Objective is the driving force of fiction," writes James Scott Bell. "It generates forward motion and keeps the Lead from just sitting around."[7]

> "A story is a character who wants something and overcomes conflict to get it."

Let's go back to my story, the one I told you in the introduction. Annie and I are the lead characters, although of the two of us only she looks like a movie star (I look like a young Hogwarts professor). We had an objective—to adopt a child. Enter stage right: Conflict. In our case, conflict didn't mean life or death, but it did present us with a choice to make. We could cut our emotional and financial losses and move on. We could say we misunderstood God, we'd simply made a mistake. Or we could continue our pursuit toward the objective.

As humans, we often tend toward the path of least resistance. We skip the stairs and take the elevator. We skip the book and read the CliffsNotes. We use the entrance with the automatic sliding doors. And most important, we don't put our emotions and savings on the line and take on the Vietnamese government when there's an easier way. Well, we don't do any of these things *unless we have an objective,* unless we're pursuing something that's worth the hardship.

When we become people who want something that's worth overcoming resistance, we no longer settle for the default Path of Least Resistance mode. That's the beginning of the power of story—to propel us toward *something*—but it gets better. Story is so much bigger than just what we want. Story helps us see beyond ourselves to the forward momentum of our Father's world, His kingdom, and our place in it.

## IT KEEPS ON HAPPENING AND IS HAPPENING STILL

In response to all of this talk about story, some might say, "Jesus died for me, and that's all I need to know." Okay, then. I'd say this response at least hints at a story, doesn't it? And yet it's been gutted, reduced to a proposition that's hardly compelling to those of us who already believe it, let alone anyone who doesn't. A proposition like this practically begs for the rest of the story, particularly if we're halfway curious.

Jesus died for me.

*Wait, who died?*

Jesus, God's Son.

*Okay, but why did He die for you?*

Well, uh, let me back up a little bit . . .

This is what I'm saying. The story is so much better. It's the introduction to both God and humanity in the garden; it's the

infection of sin and the beginning of a legacy of separation; it's the twists and turns of a reclamation project that spans continents and centuries; it's the living and active God who gives us life, movement, and being in Himself; it's the hopeful pilgrimage toward the Holy City.

Yes, the gospel is a narrative, not a truism. Frederick Buechner called it a fairy tale with "one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still."[8]

I'll say it again—the story (of which God is the Author) is so much better.

## THE RIGHT STORIES

I guess you could say that I'm "pro-story," if you're into those kinds of red state/blue state distinctions. The fact is I'm about to spend dozens of pages and thousands of words advocating that you become pro-story too, but it's important that we recognize that all stories are not created equal. What I mean is that not all compelling stories are virtuous, and not all virtuous stories are compelling. Not all stories are redemptive, not all stories are honest. Not all stories are hopeful. Some stories are harmful, some exploitative. Some stories are birthed from good intentions but miss the mark.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "Many people in this life suffer because they are anxiously searching for the man or woman, the event or encounter, which will take their loneliness away,"[9] and so it's important to note that story is not God. Story is not a saving ideology. Story won't fix you in and of itself. Story is not alive—it didn't make you and it can't save you. What I'm presenting in this book is the idea that story is a mechanism, a process for discovery, a compass of sorts, and a framework for understanding.

Every religion and cult and philosophy and separatist militia has a story. Every politician, marketer, defense attorney, and con man has a story. The worst books, movies, musicals, plays, and television shows ever written all have a story. The wrong stories—or even the right stories in the wrong hands—can be used to distract, mislead, divide, abuse, and enslave. So while I'm pro-story, it's never enough to simply have a story. The message that *story and storytellers matter* is not the same as *any story will do.*

Story is not just where we are, it's where we came from and where we're going.

The fact that stories can and do go wrong should strengthen our resolve, not undermine it. The abuse of story does not poison the form. Our work, then, is to find, follow, and tell the right stories. This is the shape of the life for which we were made.

When we become storytellers, narrative people, we start to change. It starts with how we organize information and events. Then our ears start to perk up when we hear others tell their stories. Eventually, we see the narrative in everything and we see everything through the narrative. Story is not just outcome, it's the process that precedes and follows every outcome. Story is not just what we have, it's how we got what we have and what we're going to do with it. Story is not just where we are, it's where we came from and where we're going.

Seeing the narrative in all things means taking a long view. What I mean by that is if you want to truly tell the story of World War II, you're going to need to back up a few decades to the end of World War I—any history buff will tell you that. Choices have precursors and consequences. Conflict has context. Circumstances and trials can be redeemed because of their positive effects on us. Short-term thinking and shortcuts aren't good enough. Neither are casual propositions and truisms.

It's good to have principles to live by, but it's better to practice those principles while we're on a journey. I'm all for morality, but morality in isolation lacks meaning. Morality paired with mission, what we might call "morality on the way," provides a foundation for our character as we make choices—it helps us stay the course when we face conflict, resistance, and indecision.

## THE WHOLE TRUTH

Through the frame of the right story, the past is marked by grace and the future teems with hope. In the present, we acknowledge both and commit ourselves to the pursuit. So what do the right stories look like? I like the way Donald Miller once described *Blue Like Jazz: The Movie*—"It's a story that tells the truth."[10]

The right stories tell the truth. And just as important, the right stories don't settle for partial truth. "I failed," may be a true story, but it's not the whole story because it makes no mention of redemption through forgiveness or perseverance. As long as we tell ourselves a story like that, the wrong story, we're deceiving ourselves with a grain of truth. If we want the whole truth, something that's faithful to the world we really live in, we need a story that refuses to end with, "I failed." The truth is our failures are not the end of us, and the right stories tell this truth. The whole truth.

In William Shakespeare's *Henry IV,* Hotspur declares, "O while you live, tell truth and shame the devil!"[11] Amen, Brother Hotspur. True stories shame the devil to the extent that they tell the whole truth—good, bad, ugly, and divine. True stories shame the devil to the extent that their point of view is personal but not myopic. True stories lend perspective to that which we've chosen to pursue *(Is this really worth it?)* and the conflict that invariably befalls us *(Is this really the end of the world?)*.

Early in his gospel John describes Jesus by saying, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (1:4). This light—by

which we see life as it really is—properly orients us to the truth. Jesus arrived telling a story about who He was and what He intended to do in and through people. The story shed light on the heart of God, the plight of humanity, and what happens when the two are brought together by grace. Jesus had a story to tell, and as we'll talk about more later, He commissioned His followers to bear that story.

If we dare answer such a call and go tumbling down the rabbit hole, we're given new eyes with which to see the truth in story. If you're willing, let's go on by using these new eyes to look into a mirror so we might get a good look at ourselves.