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My Story, Our Story, God's Story: the Function of a Livable Narrative in Spiritual Formation

Earl Lavender

Story or *narrative* is currently a much-discussed topic in the field of biblical interpretation. Because little of the biblical text is apodictic, it is not given to a rule-oriented reading or hermeneutic. The Bible is an extended narrative, a compelling and surprisingly cohesive one, from creation to new creation. It begins in a perfect garden and ends with the new heaven and new earth. There is also a counter-narrative—an extended history of human failure—and a central hero who rescues the narrative. That central figure, Jesus Christ, then sends out his followers to free the world from its exile from God's presence through his work of redemption. As readers contemplate the immensity of this incredible narrative, they are surprised to find themselves a part of this story. It calls the reader to radical change, to repentance, to embrace a new and unexpected trajectory for one's life. Consider Christopher Wright's summary of this epic drama:

Here is *The Story*, the grand universal narrative that stretches from creation to new creation, and accounts for everything in between. This is The Story that tells us where we have come from, how we got to be here, who we are, why the world is in the mess it is, how it can be (and has been) changed, and where we are ultimately going.¹

Wright goes on to say that the story is God's and no one else's—a desperately needed corrective to the narcissistic individualism of Western culture. God's narrative removes us as individuals from of the center of all things and correctly repositions us as a small part of his purposes.

This may sound like a life of diminished value. Not at all! God's story *is the true history* of the world. It tells us why God created us, why we are living in this moment in history, and what we should be pursuing as we journey into the future. Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?" (Mark 8.24–27).

This is the greatest question an individual can address: To what will she or he give for one's life? Every person is exchanging or giving one's life for the accumulation or pursuit of something. All world religions attempt to serve as an answer to this question. As one approaches this question of meaning, he or she brings one's unique personal narrative to the table. One cannot live in that individual story alone—one must find a larger context of meaning. Life requires investment in a framing story or grand narrative.

I recently had a student insist that, as an atheist, he had no narrative to defend nor was he searching for one. I attempted to convince him that, ironically, atheism itself is a faith system: a functioning metanarrative. It actually requires more faith than I have—for it advances the idea of a world empty of significance, meaning, or purpose. I recently tweeted, "I do *not* have enough faith to not believe in a loving creator of the universe. I am a grandfather – 'nuff said." While not stated in classic style, the thought expressed is profound...at least in

1. Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 533.

my view. There is too much beauty, too much meaning, too much mystery, and even too much evil than can be explained by non-directed evolutionary theory. Indeed, the atheist *has* a burden of proof, as does the agnostic or any other person who follows a particular view of existence. Does their grand narrative make any sense? Does it warrant belief?

My personal experiences have affirmed this universal longing for meaning. I have taught university courses on apologetics at Lipscomb University for over ten years. Before I began teaching at Lipscomb, I taught several courses at Saint Louis University, including introduction to religious experience and comparative world religions. As a former missionary and presently as director of missional studies at Lipscomb, I have worked with peoples from all six inhabited continents. It has been a wonderful journey of observing, listening, researching, reading, considering, and learning. The one question on the mind of every individual with whom I have spoken worldwide is “What is the meaning and purpose of my life?” As stated above, all have answered this question, whether they realize it or not. The life circumstances of many greatly limit their choices; nonetheless, something gives them a reason to live. John Stackhouse suggests this is how we discover our true, functioning faith or religion: it is what gets us out of bed in the morning.²

It is interesting to note how many, especially in the West, call themselves Christians yet, when asked what gets them out of bed in the morning, answer, “I have to get up and go to work so that I can pay my bills and feed and clothe my family.” It is interesting to note that Jesus called that particular view of life (narrative) “pagan”:

Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom and these things will be given as well. (Luke 12.29–31)

At the heart of God’s story is his promise to provide all his faithful children’s needs *if* they will live in full pursuit of his kingdom. As he feeds the birds and clothes the grass, he will provide for his children. Pagans pursue such things as food and clothing as the purpose of their lives because they are not aware of a loving God who will provide if they will be faithful to his calling.

That which we value most identifies our true religion or faith. That which we pursue effectively serves as our “god.” One of the devastating consequences of idolatry is that we become that which we pursue. To pursue, as ultimate value, anything or anyone other than God diminishes the value of our lives. This is true for all people. Only in Jesus can we find the way to our Father and the true purpose of our lives (“the way, the truth, and the life”—John 14.6).

Competing Stories

I begin most of my graduate and undergraduate courses with this statement: “We live in a world of competing stories—each is out to convert you to its value system.” How do we know which story is true? One of the great adventures of life is the continual exploration of the answer to that question. We should constantly put to the test value-providing narratives to see if they warrant our belief. In Christian environments, we call this “growing to maturity.” In other surroundings, it is simply looking for the best explanation of things. The driving force of our present world economy is keeping the question of life open to constant discovery and new direction. If one were content with what she or he has, why would one purchase more? We are inundated with propaganda to buy “the next best thing” that provides, in a compelling way, the life we all seek...or so they say!

The challenge for Christians in today’s environment is to stay true to God’s story and not allow the world’s stories to convert or influence us. This is not a new problem. Paul confronts it in his letter to the Colossians. The main heresy he confronts in that letter is *syncretism*, the choosing of bits and pieces of competing stories to form one’s belief system. Paul’s answer to this dilemma is unambiguous. There is only one story—and it is that of Jesus Christ (Col 1.15–22). He warns, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col

2. John Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics* (Oxford, 2002), 100.

2.8). Paul continues his challenge by reminding the believers that in baptism (2.9–15) they had claimed the story of Jesus as their one and only purpose for living. Their lives were now to be hidden in Christ (3.3).

The Colossians had embraced Jesus Christ as their savior, but they accepted the world stories around them to be their “lord.” A little Christianity, with a pinch of Judaism, a touch of astrology perhaps, a large dose of pagan emperor worship. . . mix it together and you had the religion of the Colossian Christians. Paul was very clear: it is either all of Jesus Christ or none. There is no middle ground. While the “ingredients for belief” available in our culture have changed, the challenge of syncretism remains. A little nationalism, a pinch of Christianity, a cup of materialism, a large helping of narcissism. . . mix it together and you have the worldview of many Western Christians. Jesus serves as a wonderful savior—but not as lord.

How could I suggest such a thing? Our behaviors manifest our true beliefs. The stories that shape us determine our values. What do we want most? What do we spend our time pursuing? Where do our minds go for pleasure? If Jesus is not the answer to these questions, he is not the lord of our lives. If we want the pursuit of him to be the story of our lives, we must have the appropriate practices in place that allow us to dwell there. We cannot shape our minds by the pursuit of Jesus if we dedicate so little of our time and effort to this pursuit. No church can provide enough food in an hour or two a week to keep us “seeking first the kingdom of God.” We, as individuals and the church, desperately need the disciplines in place to keep us connected to the vine (John 15) on a constant basis.

God's Story: A Theology of Creation

John 15 presents a compelling and fundamental truth of life. That which provides ultimate nourishment for us will determine what fruit our lives produce. A robust, healthy theology of creation reminds us God created all things for his glory and purposes. The creation story is a marvelous telling of a triune God, existing outside of the material universe, calling it into existence by the power of his *logos* (“word/wisdom”). God created every atom and molecule to glorify him. Everything has its purpose, designed to form and fill God's creation. God created humankind, male and female, as the crowning work of his creation. God intended for this fundamental partnership (male/female) of collaborative and sacrificial love to be a unique manifestation of his essence. As God rested from creation on the seventh day, he handed to humanity the continuing responsibility of his creative work: forming and filling the earth.

This is theological foundation for John 15. Jesus is the vine; God is the owner of the vineyard. The sole purpose of the vineyard is to bear fruit, and intimate connection to the vine is the only way to bear fruit. Jesus has clearly stated that he can do and say only those things that proceed from the Father (John 5.29, 30; 8.28). He can do *nothing* apart from the Father. It is essential that we acknowledge Jesus is not making an ontological statement. It is not that he has no choice, that the Father forces him to do his will. His obedience is not an unchallengeable fact of his life. Jesus *has made the choice* to do only what the Father would have him do and only say what the Father would say. This is the “livable narrative” Jesus chooses to live into. In John 15, Jesus invites us to embody that same narrative. Without being intimately connected to the vine, if we attempt to live apart from him, “we can do nothing” (15.5).

The metaphor of the vine is significant. It calls for bearing fruit. . . much fruit, healthy fruit. The vine produces good fruit only when it is healthy, connected to the life-giving source. This is where my story—our story—connects to God's story. I can only produce that for which God created me if I am living connected fully and completely to Jesus. The word to describe this relationship in John 15 is *abide* or *remain*. The Greek word, *meno*, is more intense than both English translations. *Meno* describes a relationship that is intentional, that demands every aspect of our life—we are loyal to it until death. It does not permit other stories to invade our loyalties. Where one's mind abides identifies her or his true story of life.

The Missing Livable Narrative

It is essential that we not separate Jesus' invitation to abide in him from his role as our savior. Earlier Jesus explained the love of God in the best known verse of John's gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3.16). Note that

in John's language, eternal life is not life after death, but life in God's end-time messianic kingdom. Jesus did not come just to save us for the afterlife; he came to save our perishing lives *now*—giving us a life (livable narrative) that will never end. That is why Jesus is called eternal life itself (1 John 1.1–4). The purpose of our redemption is to bear the fruit for which God created us (Eph 2.10). This is the missing “livable narrative.” The disciplines involved in the process of spiritual formation are not for self-healing or self-realization. If we use prayer and meditation to “find ourselves” rather than discovering how to “hide our lives in Christ” (Col 3.3), our life narrative remains focused on us—misdirected and ultimately destructive.

N.T. Wright's thoughts are very helpful concerning this. He speaks of the world living in an exile of its own making. As faithful children of God, we are called to bear witness of a new reality of living in Christ Jesus:

The key is that humans are made in the image of God. That is the equivalent, on the wider canvas, of Israel's unique position and vocation. And bearing God's image in not just a fact, it is a vocation. It means being called to reflect into the world the creative and redemptive love of God. It means being made for relationship, for stewardship, for worship...³

If we are to reflect to the world the creative and redemptive love of God, or to bear the fruit for which God created us, we need disciplines or practices to keep us focused on God's story. The purpose of spiritual formation through the disciplines of study, prayer, mediation, fasting, and other practices is to live into God's missional purposes for our lives. That, without exception, is a better story than the world could ever give us.

Conclusion

In today's culture, it is very easy to slip into a comprised story of faith. It is seldom intentional but, just the same, it is deadly. If our story remains “our story,” the spiritual disciplines serve to reinforce our self-centered view of life—turning God simply into the granter of our desires, even when counterproductive to the kingdom. The same danger applies to the church. If our story remains “our story,” the purpose of the church is reduced to meeting our needs, rather than freeing us from the false stories of the world.

Surrendering our story to God's is not easy. In some ways, it is terrifying. What does it mean to release control of our lives to God? It is easy to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior as long as we continue to write our own scripts of life. What does it look like to hand the pen over to God and allow the Holy Spirit to direct our lives? This is the authentic purpose of the spiritual disciplines. When used appropriately, they lead us to release our lives to him for whom they were created. We are shaped into the “image of God” by making ourselves available to participate in his redemptive story.

What does this look like? To state it simply, it looks like Jesus. While we will never fully realize this goal, it should be that which drives the activities and words of every moment of our lives. If this is not true, it is only because we lack the discipline to live in that pursuit. Read the challenge of Paul in Philippians 3; hear him call each of us to this pursuit. While we will never get there, it will make life full and meaningful until we take our last breath. Then we will finally be like the One we have so passionately pursued. That is the real story of life. There is no other.

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3. Wright, N.T., *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (IVP, 1999), 183.