

## **The Story (A Stack of Letters)**

Hebrews 4:11-13 continued (and the whole Bible)

#2 (of 3) in our mini-series “Reading Your Bible”

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### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus we look to you, and we pray that you would help us to see you—to see your hands and your feet, to see those beautiful scars. We thank you Lord Jesus that you tell a story. Your body tells a story. We thank you that you are the plot of the story. You are the heart of God, from the bosom of the Father. We thank you Lord Jesus. We ask that we would see you. We pray that you would cause us to preach. In your name we pray, Amen.

### **Message**

We’re preaching a mini series on reading the Bible. Last week, we preached that the Bible is like a love letter. But it’s more than a love letter; it’s a stack of letters written over time and that comprises a story.

One morning, during the Luftwaffe bombings in WWII, Leslie Weatherhead (a British preacher) found a little boy sitting alone in the burned-out remains of some old building.

His clothes were soiled and torn, and his face was covered with soot, save for the trail of tears that exposed his pink cheeks beneath. Weatherhead approached the little boy, bent down, and asked, “Son, where are your parents?” “They’re dead, sir,” he replied.

Weatherhead asked about his relatives. “They’re all dead, sir,” Then he asked, “Where’s your home?” The little boy pointed down the street to a heap of rubble and debris. “Tell me, son,” inquired Weatherhead, “... *Who are you?*” And the boy replied: “I ain’t nobody – nothing.”

Sadly, in a way, the little boy was right, wasn’t he? *In a way*, because all of his stories had been destroyed: Mommy, Daddy, favorite toys; pictures of vacations; promises of camp next summer; little rituals at the dinner table; favorite stories at bedtime . . . all erased.

He had no past (it seemed), and he lost the seeds, which would bear a future. He had no story; he was orphaned.

We have an entire society of orphans, for we’ve lost our story. Modernism has taught us that stories are merely myth, and facts are truth; facts like carbon, oxygen, nitrogen.

Well, stories are made of facts, but facts without a story have no *meaning*. So, we modern people have trillions of facts—at our fingertips on our cell phones. We have trillions of facts, but don’t have a clue as to what they mean.

Modernism (20<sup>th</sup> century thinking) teaches that matter is all that matters. There is no plot, no story other than the stories we make up. So, modern parents scold their children, saying, “You’re telling stories,” as if a story is a *lie*. Modern people have come to believe that a story is a lie.

Michael Mead points out that the word “story” comes from the concept “storehouse.”

- A story is a store or storehouse.
- Things are stored in a storehouse. Persons are stored in a story.
- So, if stories are lies, there are no persons; just carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen – facts without meaning.

Children love stories. My kids used to always say, “Tell me about when I was born!” So I’d say:

Well, Coleman... the time of your birth was 4:27 A.M., November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1994. You were born at Littleton Adventist Hospital (7700 S. Broadway, Littleton, CO 80122, phone # (303) 730-8900). You can call this number to verify these facts.

Well, if I told that to four-year-old Coleman, he’d just look at me a like an orphan sitting in a bombed-out building. He doesn’t want the *facts*; he wants the *story* that gives the facts their meaning:

Coleman, November 2<sup>nd</sup> was your mommy’s birthday, and now it’s your birthday; because long ago, when mommy was just eighteen years old, and had just met Jesus, she prayed that she’d have four children by her 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. Coleman, when you were born, everyone wore party hats, and there were two birthday cakes . . . because Coleman, you are God’s answer to Mommy’s prayer!”

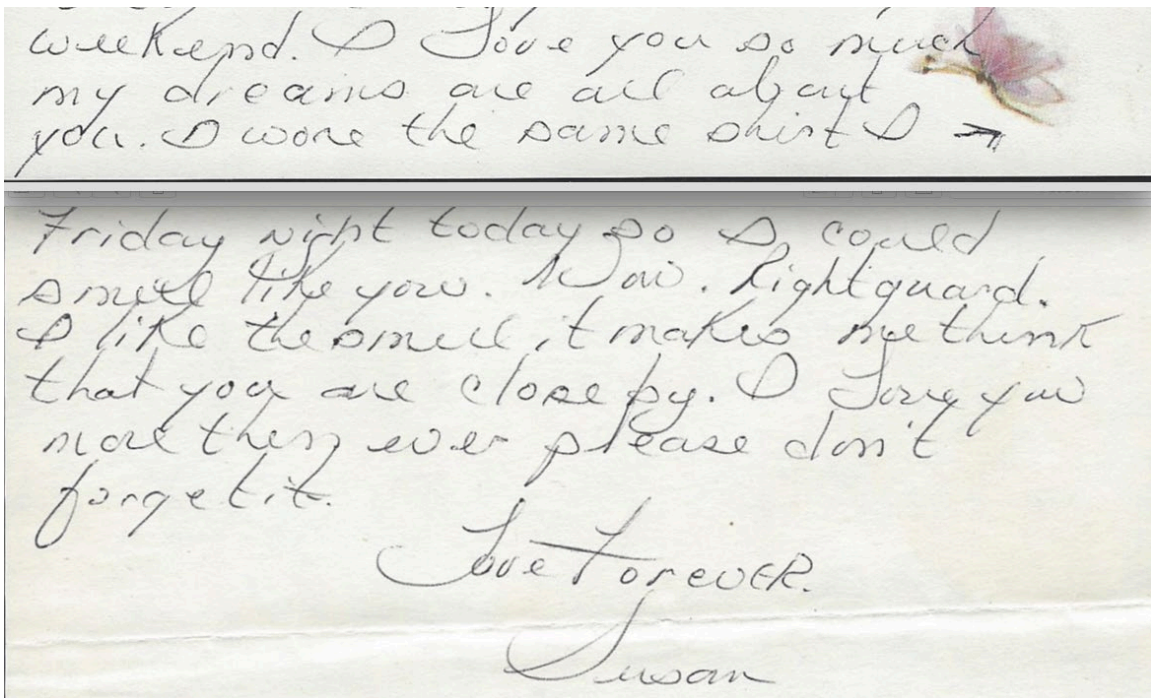
If one day, Coleman loses his job and his wife leaves him, saying, “You ain’t nobody – nothin’...” the address of the hospital won’t help him much. But the story of two birthday cakes, everyone wore party hats, and “I was God’s answer to Mommy’s prayer” . . . that could save his life!

Stories tell us who we are, and stories tell us who another person is. Stories reveal people.

Last week, I told you how I devoured Susan’s love letters in college. An objective observer might say, “Wow, they must’ve really contained some important information.” Well, not really.

Love letters are very different than textbooks, owner’s manuals, dictionaries, and cookbooks. Normally, love letters contain a great deal of drivel, and lots of stories—seemingly meaningless stories: what she wore, where she went with her roommate after school, what she ate for dinner, and I devoured them all.

I’ll quote one of those love letters that I showed you last week:



*It seems so hard to believe just a few days ago I was in your arms, kissing you, and now I am over 300 miles away... I love you so much; my dreams are all about you. I wore the same shirt I wore Friday night today so I could smell like you. Wow ... Right Guard. I love the smell. It makes me think that you are close by.*

*I love you more than ever.*

You see? That Susan Coleman wore the same shirt on Monday that she did on Friday—that fact is objectively *meaningless*. It was not even recorded in her files at Fort Lewis College. But that little story was absolutely critical to me. Why? Because it revealed a person, and I had a hunch our persons might merge one day. Stories reveal persons. Her story might become my story . . . two might become one—a communion of persons.

If someone at CU said to me, “Tell me who Susan is,” I wouldn’t give them her student ID number and date of birth. I’d say, “Well, you know, she wore the same shirt on Monday that she did on Friday.”

I’d tell stories.

“Hey Luke, who is God?” And Luke writes: “And behold, there were shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night...”

If someone asks you, “*Who is God?*” what do you say?

A. He is Necessary Beingness, Uncreated Creator, triune in

nature, being of three persons and one substance.

OR

- B. “There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to the father, ‘Give me my share of the inheritance.’ That prodigal boy squandered his inheritance in a distant land, and when He came home, hoping to get more stuff, His Father saw him at a great distance, ran to him, and covered him in kisses, crying out, ‘Kill the fatted calf! My son who was lost is now found!’ God is like that!”

Both A and B are correct, I suppose.

But which is the Word of Truth?

The first is the Word of Man, but the story is the Word of God.

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

- John 14:8-9a

Seen what? A man touching lepers, holding children, giving sight to the blind, Good News to the poor, telling stories and parables . . . Jesus.

He said, “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*” (John 14:6).

The truth isn’t a formula, a law, or a concept—it’s a Person!

*Who is He?* Well, read His story.

He is *the* story. His name means “God is Salvation,” and that’s the story.

Last week, we preached on how the Word of God is “*the Gospel of your salvation*.” I Peter 1:25 says, “*The Word of the Lord is the Gospel which was preached to you.*”

God is Love.

Jesus is the living incarnate Word of Love.

All of Scripture is about Jesus.

Scripture is a love letter, or more accurately, a stack of love letters.

Love letters are full of stories, and even more, a stack of love letters, tied with a ribbon makes the greatest of all stories! It is a love story. Like this:



All of Susan's love letters, in a stack, tied with a ribbon. If you were to read that stack of letters, you would see a story emerge: *the story* of Susan's love for me, how she revealed her heart and captured mine.

The Bible is a stack of letters, which comprise the greatest of all stories: *the story* of God's love for you; how He reveals His heart and captures yours.

It's easy for me to get all sentimental about this stack of letters NOW. I know the plot. But it was brutally hard for me to live through these letters THEN. Some letters are happy, some despairing, some angry, some demanding.

The Bible is a stack of letters, some happy, some profoundly sad, some wrathful,

- Some even erotic: *"Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits"* (Song of Solomon 4:16). I think that would be a great memory verse for my wife!
- Some letters are poetic, *"Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy."* (Psalm 96:12)
- Some are demanding: *"Thou shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3).
- Some are historical: *"And they nailed Him to a tree" ... "And the tomb was empty"* (Luke 23).
- Some are prophetic: *"And I saw the New Jerusalem coming down adorned as a bride for her bridegroom"* (Revelation 21: 2).

Each was written at a different time in a different place, through different people in different situations and cultures, speaking different languages.

A zillion facts, and yet one plot and one story:

1. The story of the Father redeeming His lost children
2. The story of the Bridegroom, Jesus, redeeming His unfaithful Bride
3. The story of the Spirit filling His temple of flesh.

It's the story of God creating us, saving us and always loving us.

This is a gross simplification:

But in the Old Testament (or Covenant), we read the story of our failure.

The Law reveals our failure.

In the New Testament or Covenant, we read the story of God's success.

God comes in Jesus, bears our failures, and gives us His success.  
“*Jesus Christ, Crucified and risen from the dead,*” is the New Covenant,  
also called the “*eternal covenant*”.

Eternal means that it was the plan all along.

The Bible is His Story: The story of God’s love for us, the story of God revealing Himself to us, romancing us and creating us in his own image. It’s the story of God creating faith through Grace. It’s the revelation of Jesus: which means, “God is Salvation.” That’s the meaning of the story.

The Old Testament is thirty-four books of history, poetry, songs, and prophecy.

The New Testament is twenty-seven books:

- Four gospels telling the story of Jesus’ earthly life,
- Acts, telling the story of the early Church,
- The epistles, which are letters,
- And the Revelation, which is a vision.

The Bible definitely includes rules, commandments, and laws.

But they are all contained in a story—the story of God’s Word, Jesus.

(Like the stone tablets were contained in the Ark of the Covenant, covered with lambs blood—the story of Mercy)

The Bible is His story, but get this: His story is History.

That’s because Jesus is the meaning of all things—the *logos*, the “plot”.

He is the Word, through which all things are created, all space and all time.

So, the Bible is not only “*The Greatest Story Ever Told.*”

In a very real sense, it’s the “*Only Story Ever Told.*”

All stories are a shadow of this story, and in fact, a part of this story.

It’s like J.R.R. Tolkien said: “*You can’t keep the gospel out of stories.*”

Even tragedies are a longing for gospel – for good news.

Madeline L’Engle writes, “*It is one of the greatest triumphs of Lucifer that he has managed to make Christians (Christians!) believe that a story is a lie...*”

Modern secular man believes a story is a lie. So ultimately, there is no story unless we write it. But what’s really tragic, is that modern American Christians seem to believe the very same thing.

We’ve stopped believing in the Story that reveals the Person Who saves.

Instead, we believe in values, principles and programs, psychologies, sociologies and ideologies . . . that is: “knowledge of good and evil,” the LAW. So we come to church and read the Bible to get application points, and things we can do to make our life work—knowledge to make ourselves in the image of God—knowledge that we can use to write our own story.

We come to church to write our story, rather than to hear *the* Story.

And then, for us, Scripture is no longer *the Great Story*.  
It has become *the Great Cookbook* for whatever soup we happen to be making.  
And yet whatever soup we make is death... it's "*nobody, nothin'.*"

And that is nothing new. Throughout history, religious people have cut up the story to use the pieces to write their own stories. We've ignored Scripture in order to use scriptures to justify every manner of evil: gossip, slander, murder, genocide, rape, apartheid, slavery, crusades and inquisitions.

We cut up the Story of Love to justify our lack of love, just as the Pharisees cut up the Savior to make themselves the savior. We cut up the story of Grace, because we obviously can't write that story. We cut up the Story and turn it into works, because we want to glorify ourselves.

I think that was the sin in the garden at the tree of knowledge  
And it is the sin in the garden on Calvary at the foot of the cross.

We cut up the Story, because we don't trust the plot.  
We cut up the Story to write our own story (with the pieces).  
We did it with the Living Word, and we do it with the written word.

Well, the Bible isn't a cookbook for whatever soup you'd like to make. It's the story of *God* making soup, and check it out: You're an ingredient!

A lawyer asked Jesus, "*What must I do...*" (The Law is all about what we do.) "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" The lawyer was making himself some salvation soup. And what did Jesus tell him? A story: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among robbers – lost. A Samaritan bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and saved him."

Jesus told the lawyer The Story. That is, *you* can't make salvation soup; you're lost. But *God* is making soup through me. Listen to the Story and behold, you're an ingredient; you've been found.

Matthew writes, "*Jesus spoke nothing to the crowd without a parable—a story.*" The crowd had to surrender to the story to get the meaning. The meaning is a person . . . stories store persons.

So read your Bible as a story:

- When you read a good story, you read with a sense of context, culture, language, genre, flow, and plot.
- A story uses all those things to suck you in.
- When you read a good story, you picture the story, imagine the story, and you enter the story.

"*Moreover, the dogs licked Lazarus' sores.*" See? I think you're supposed to picture that. You're supposed to imagine that. When they throw the harlot at Jesus' feet, what does that scripture smell like, look like, feel like? Dust, heat, sweat, whimpers, and screams, religious folks holding stones and a prostitute half naked, bleeding lying in the dirt.

Then, what does it feel like when Jesus, says, *“Neither do I condemn you.”*

See? That does more than the theological concept of propitiation.

- You don’t just learn information; you experience persons.
- You don’t just comprehend the story; the Story comprehends you.

When you read a good story, you don’t think, *“How can I apply this?”*  
*“How can I use this?”*

Actually, you don’t think about yourself at all.

You lose yourself in the story, and then you find the story in you.

After watching James Bond movies, I drive fast.  
Nobody tells me to do it; I just do it.

When you get caught up in a story, you ingest the plot, and it changes you.  
Like this:

[Image of a Bronco fan with his face painted orange and blue with two bronco statues on his shoulders]

Nobody told these people to do this!

[Image of a man entirely covered in orange “fur” and his face painted orange with a giant smile on his face]

They got caught up in the story of the Broncos, began to love the Broncos and worship the Broncos, then began to look like the Broncos.

[Image of a group of Sikhs dressed in Broncos shirts and orange turbans on their heads]

...even converted to the Broncos from other cultures

[Image of a Bronco fan dressed as an orange Darth Vader with a Bronco shirt on]

...even converted from the dark side, to the orange side.

Get caught up in the story of Jesus, and you’ll begin to *love* Jesus, *worship* Jesus, then begin to *look* like Jesus.

[Image of a man removing his shoes and gifting them to a lady in need]

When I lose myself in a story, I find the story in me. Then, lo and behold, I find myself in the story. I lose myself and I find myself in the story.

I don’t have to think about it; I just do it.

I lose myself in James Bond, and I drive fast like James Bond.

...and suspect, “I kind of am James Bond.”



Well, you lose yourself in a story when you have faith that the plot is good.

Every story has a plot, and every event in that story takes on meaning *because* of that plot. If something didn't have meaning to the plot, the author wouldn't have put it in the story. So, in the Good Story, every event is transformed by faith in the Author and His plot.

- That's why you pay attention to every seemingly boring event in a story.
- And that's why you don't panic at every terrifying turn in the story.

James Bond is hanging by a fingernail from the edge of a cliff, while helicopters shoot grenades at Him. And no one stands up screaming, "*My God! James Bond is going to die!!!*" No one cowers in fear. No one panics. Instead, we lean forward in hope, for we all have faith in the plot. And we want to see the glory of 007 revealed.

In a Bond movie, the protagonist is the plot. James Bond is the plot.

SO In a Bond movie, "All things work together for the glory of James Bond."

In the Bible, "All things work together for the glory of God in Christ Jesus."

Well, imagine what it would mean if your life was a good story that a good Someone was telling. NOT simply that you were *reading* a good story, but you *were* the good story and you knew<sup>1</sup>

Imagine if you were James Bond (or even better, Jesus) . . . and knew it. You would encounter all sorts of obstacles. You would experience loss and pain, but you wouldn't surrender to faithlessness and fear. The bombs might go off. The storm might rage out on the sea, but you wouldn't panic, you might even go to sleep. You would have faith in the Author, and you would live the plot.

Not only would it turn out good in the end, but every experience would be transformed by your faith in the Plot. They might launch grenades at you; your friends might betray you; you might experience a great deal of pain, but you'd lean into the story knowing that this is what makes a story good and makes you good— knowing that it's all working to your glory.

Imagine if the story was all about you.

*But* is the story all about you?

Are you Jesus?

Are you the plot?

Does everything work to your glory?

Well... No! No! No!

You're not the protagonist.

Maybe you're the antagonist that crucifies the protagonist!

You're not the author. You're not the plot. It's not to your glory.

It's not all about you . . .

*Unless* the Author has *made* the Protagonist all about you.

It's not all about you . . .

Unless it's a love story . . . and you are the beloved.

Then it *is* all about you, not as the subject, but the object of His affection.

Then it is all about you by Grace—the plot is Grace.

And you are glorified by Grace, through faith.

You didn't glorify yourself, but you are glorified!

The beloved is glorified by the Grace of the one who loves the beloved.

In a Love Story, The beloved is the antagonist, who is conquered by the protagonist and is made in the image of the protagonist. In other words the one that doesn't love is conquered by love and begins to love.

In our love stories, both parties are often antagonists and love it's self is the protagonist. In the Gospel, Love Himself takes on flesh and becomes the protagonist, while all of humanity is the antagonist—so much so that we crucify the protagonist on a tree in a garden. We crucify Him. Yet, that act of Grace creates faith and transforms the *antagonists* into the image of the *Protagonist*, the One who is Life and the very image of Love.

In John 12, on Palm Sunday, Jesus says, "When I am lifted up (and He was speaking of His cross)... I will draw (*helkuo* – I will romance) all people unto myself.

At the cross, the Protagonist—who is the Author's Plot or Word, who is Love in flesh—conquers all antagonists and draws the beloved to Himself. The antagonist is the absence of Love. The antagonist is evil itself—evil that has infected the beloved.

"All people" are the beloved; Humanity is the beloved.

Jesus is the Groom. We are His Bride.

In the Revelation, John sees the Bride of Christ descending to earth from Heaven, and she has "The Glory of God."

Scripture is clear that God shares his Glory with "no other."

Therefore the Bride must NOT be an "other."

The Bride is the very body of her Groom and the temple of the living God. She has received Glory by Grace working through Faith. She has surrendered to the Author's Plot, and become His body, radiating His glory!

So we read the story to lose ourselves in the story and find the story in us and even find ourselves in the story. We even become the Story by Grace through Faith. We become the Bride of Jesus, and even more the body of Jesus.

So... it is all about you.

And it is all to your glory.  
For you actually *are* the Body of Christ.  
But only by Grace through faith.

So, you cannot be proud, but you must be grateful. You didn't write your story.  
You can't write your story, but you will live your story by Grace through Faith.

But what if we reject the story?  
What if we don't have faith in the Author or His plot?  
What if we insist on writing our own story?

Well then we're lost. In fact, you are utterly lost. We are antagonists to the protagonist who creates and sustains all things. We reject the Word of the Author of all things and so have chosen *no* thing. We've written ourselves into nowhere and nothing. Some call it Hell.

But is the Author still writing the story? YES! You are not stronger than the Author, and the Author is Love. In a love story the protagonist conquers the antagonist, good conquers evil by turning evil into good—that's the story, the Love Story—the Gospel.

Hell *cannot* be the end because Jesus is the End. Jesus is the Beginning and the End. He is the Word of Love. He is the Plot. When you believe the Story, you will proclaim the Story, and God will use you to write the story on another's heart. Jesus said, "*The gates of Hell shall not prevail against my church*"—"my beloved" (Matt. 16:18) Well, that's quite a story!

The Bible contains several plot summaries, and those plot summaries contain all of space and time, testifying to the Beginning and the End—the entire stack of love letters.

Here are just a few:

Colossians 1:18-20

*He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.*

(You see, that's a plot summary, a summary of His story and history . . . all of time, beginning to end.)

Ephesians 1:9-10

*For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite (anakephalaio—"bring together under one head") all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Romans 5:23 *"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and [all] are justified by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."*

Romans 8:30 *"And those whom he justified he also glorified."*

Romans 11:32 *"For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon all."*

1 Corinthians 15:22 *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."*

Revelation 21:5-6

*And He Who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also, He said "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."*

Beginning to End . . . that's the plot! That's the "Word"— Jesus. And did you notice that He said, *The End?*" Not *an end*, as if there are two ends. No! There is *one plot, one story, one End*. So, if you come to an end that's not Jesus, then it's not the End! And isn't that what makes a story great:

- You think it's the end! Superman is dead, but in the last frame of the movie, you hear a heartbeat.
- Jesus cries out from the cross and delivers up His Spirit; you think it's the end, but then you see Him standing on a throne. Death is NOT the end. Jesus is the Living End.
- People weep and gnash their teeth in outer darkness. Some are cast into consuming fire . . . But it's not the End, if it's not Jesus. Jesus is the End, and Jesus is the Plot.

Have faith in the Author and His Plot!!

I've discovered very painfully that many folks who call themselves "Christians" get really agitated by the plot summaries in Scripture. Perhaps there are many reasons for this, but really just one: We don't have faith in the Author or His Plot, so we seize control of the Plot and try to write the story.

That's like reading most of the letters in my wife's stack of love letters and then trashing the last two or three letters and re-writing them myself. We seize control of our own story, and we seize control of other's stories. And so, we don't proclaim the Gospel—that is: "God is Salvation." We threaten with the Gospel—that is: "God is salvation" *IF* you choose to make Him the savior, *IF* you chose to be Author and Lord of the Plot.

We stop telling the story and begin telling the *anti*-story. We say, "You better take this knowledge of the good and write a good story." **BUT IF** you write the

story, then: *You are “salvation,” and you just crucified God is salvation—the Plot*—in a word: Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

So...Why do we hate the verses that say, “God is Love,” and “Love wins, and that’s the story?” I think it’s because, we want to write our own story. We want to glorify ourselves, but we only desecrate ourselves. We want our will to trump God’s will, yet His will is reality.

To write your own story is to write yourself out of reality . . . and into “nowhere, nothing.” It is to drop a bomb on your own house. It is to be utterly lost.

We’ve all been lost, and some will be lost even after their body dies, but that’s not the end of the story. THE PLOT came to seek and to save the lost. And that’s THE STORY—The Gospel.

Well this morning I’m trying to make a particular point:  
I think we’ve stopped reading our Bibles, because we’ve lost faith in the plot.

We read that Sodom was destroyed by the eternal consuming fire, who is God... AND SO we stop reading before we get to Ezekiel 16 and discover that *Sodom* will be restored and *Jerusalem* will be silenced by her beauty, the beauty of Grace.

We read that the earth opened up and swallowed the unfaithful Israelites alive into Sheol . . . AND SO we stop reading . . . before we get to Ezekiel 37 and hear God say, “Son of Man, I will raise the whole house of Israel, from their graves and lead them into the land—the Promised Land.

We read that the Israelites sacrificed lambs in the temple . . . AND SO stop reading, thinking, “*How primitive and barbaric!*” We stop reading before we get to Revelation 5 and see a slaughtered lamb standing on the throne of God giving meaning to all space and time, while every creature—which would include every lamb—unceasingly worships Jesus, the Lamb, in a new creation. We read, “*the soul that sins will surely die,*” so we panic and try to *rewrite the story* . . . AND SO *don’t read the story and hear the voice*, from the throne say, “*Look I make all things new.*” “*I am the beginning and end.*” “*I am the life.*”

Because we don’t believe the Plot, we have stopped reading the Bible. And we have stopped living our lives. And we have stopped proclaiming the Gospel: The Good News—“God is Salvation.”

When you trust the Plot, and so believe the Story, it changes the meaning of every event in your story, because the Story is a Love Story, and you are the Beloved.

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<sup>1</sup> If you write the story, you crucify the plot, and create nowhere and nothing. So you are nowhere and nothing, teaching others to be nowhere and nothing. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*You traverse land and sea to make one convert and when you do, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves*” (Matt. 23:15).

Every *child* knows this—that the story matters, but *adults* have forgotten this, because they have come to believe the lie that they write their own story, with their knowledge of good and evil.

Imagine if this was your experience, but you didn't trust the Story, because you didn't know the plot:

Clip from *Cinderella*

Cinderella has just entered the room in a dress she has prepared for the ball. Her wicked stepsisters rip off her jewelry and tear her dress to pieces in jealousy. Her wicked stepmother looks on and does not defend Cinderella. Cinderella is left in rags as the stepsisters depart for the ball.

If that was your experience, you'd think, "*I'm a worthless orphan, a 'nobody, nothin'.*" But because we know the Plot, we want to preach Gospel: "Cinderella, don't despair! Your Prince will find you, and your story will be told to generations! Little girls around the world will pretend that they are you—the Beloved."

Now listen to the Gospel: You are the Bride of Christ, the Beloved, and that also makes you the Body of Christ. If you are a dude and the bride part doesn't make sense, well know that being the bride also means you're the Body of Christ.

Imagine if this was your experience, but you didn't trust the Story, because you didn't know the plot:

Clip from *Dumbo*

A group of elephants ignores and isolates Dumbo because of his large ears.

If you were Dumbo, and you didn't know the story, you'd think, "*I'm a worthless elephant with big ears ... 'I'm nobody, nothin'.*" But because we know the plot, we want to preach gospel: "Dumbo, have courage! You're the most famous elephant in all the world! Dumbo you will rise from the earth, as if on eagle's wings and you will save the whole circus. All eyes will see you, and get this: your shame will become your glory! In you, the curse becomes the blessing. You are 'somebody, somethin'!"

Imagine if this was your experience, but you didn't trust the Story, because you didn't know the plot:

Clip from *Passion*

In pain while suffering on the cross Jesus cries out: “*Eloi, Eloi! Lama sabachthan?*” —“*My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?*”

Let me ask you:

Do you ever feel forsaken?

Do you know that Jesus came to wear your shirt, your skin, your flesh? He came to wear your story. And give you His Story—like a robe of righteousness that you put on. He bore your “nobody, nothin’,” which makes you “somebody, somethin’.” He bore it until you believe you’re trapped in “nobody, nothin’.” But when you believe, you find that your story (past, present, and future) has become His story, and His Story, your story.

You are somebody something!

Not only is every event in your story transformed by His Story, the two of you have a shared story . . . that’s the love story. It’s not about knowing facts. It’s about knowing and being known by a person. Stories store persons and a shared story is a communion of persons. And a communion of persons is the Kingdom of God. I think it’s also the definition of Love—many persons, one substance.

I know you feel like an orphan who has lost your story, but you are *not* an orphan. You are His story of Love—God’s answer to God’s own Prayer. In the beginning God prayed, “Let us make man in our own image and likeness.”

You are the story of Love—the answer to God’s own prayer.

And now, I know that’s all a bit much . . . So I hope you get this much: God is Love. Jesus is the Word of Love. Through Jesus God is telling a Love Story. That story is your story. So read it, as such.

That’s the way the Jews were to read God’s Story.

They didn’t only *read* the story of Passover; they *smelled* it, *touched* it, *tasted* it—roast lamb, bitter herbs, blood red wine... They didn’t just read it; they *lived* it!

Several years ago, Fred Craddock was touring in Israel. He was in the hands of a Jewish guide named Jonah, travelling from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. On this particular day, Jonah said, “Can I take you the long way?” Professor Craddock said, “Well, sure, Jonah.”

So Jonah took him down a little old road, pulled him off to the side, and said,

I want to show you something, and tell you a story.

You see that hill over there? You see those trees?

Well, there’s a road at the base of the Hill. You can’t see it now, but it’s there.

You see, they thought we were gonna come round that road, so they got up in those trees, fixin' to ambush us. But we caught wind of it, and came around the other way, over the top of the hill, and we killed every one of those... blankety blanks."

Fred stopped him and said, "Wow, Jonah, was that in the War of '48 or '67?" And Jonah said, "That was in the Maccabean War." (The Maccabean War was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.) And so Fred said, "Why, Jonah, you're telling that story like you were there!" And with a level gaze, Jonah looked back at Fred and said, "I was."

Were you there when the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life?

Were you there in the still, black night -so as not to be seen- to hear Jesus whisper "*Nicodemus, you must be born again?*"

Were you there when the nails tore at His flesh; when He cried, "*Father, forgive them,*" and the sky grew dark and the earth shook?

Were you there with the women, dancing in front of an empty tomb?

Were you there when John heard "*every creature in Heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To Him Who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing, and honor, and glory, and might forever and ever, Amen?'*"

## Communion

Were you there when the Passover Lamb of God took bread and broke it, saying "*This is My Body, which is for you, do this in remembrance of Me?*" [Peter takes bread from the communion table and breaks it.]

Were you there when in the same way, He took the cup and said, "*This is the New Covenant in My blood; Do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me?*" [Peter takes a jug of wine from the communion table and pours it into a cup.]

Were you there?

Take a good look at the communion table.

Just close your eyes and answer the question: Were you there?

We invite you to come to the table and ingest the plot.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
(Ohh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)  
Tremble

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?



Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?  
Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?  
(Ohh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)  
Tremble

Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
(Ohh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)  
Tremble

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Well, were you there when the stone was rolled away?  
Were you there when the stone was rolled away?  
(Ohh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)  
Tremble

Were you there when the stone was rolled away?

Likely composed by African-American slaves in the 19th century  
Sung by Vince Colbert, worship leader at The Sanctuary

### **John 1:1-5**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

That Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We nailed Him to the tree, and He rose from the dead, and He said do this in remembrance of me. Come to the table.

### **Benediction**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and through the power of the Holy Spirit may you believe the Gospel. And then I suspect you'll want to read your Bible. You'll probably get to parts near Leviticus and think, "*What the heck?*" And you might get discouraged. Well, keep reading. You'll get a little further and enter some parts where they enter the land and you'll think, "*This is scary and violent; I don't think I want to keep reading!*" Well, keep reading! Why? Because you know the Plot.

Like I said. It was hard living through my love letters with Susan. But I like them now because I know the plot. It's a good plot. When you read Scripture you'll get to parts that are confusing or bewildering. Scripture is a hard read. We are talking about the Word of God written down. But you know the Plot, talk to Him. He lives in you. And we'll talk about that more next week.

So keep reading. And there's one other thing you can keep doing: You can keep living with courage, hope, faith, and joy and you will proclaim the Gospel, because you are the walking, talking Gospel! In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.*