

## My Story and His Story: A Stack of Love Letters

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Last time, I asked you to break into small groups and share the best thing that you ever read ... something that captured you or engaged you. Most of you shared novels and stories, then Nan Philips said, "My husband's love letters!"

Last week, we talked about the Bible as a love letter. Now, we'll talk about how it's also a story.

Last year, I told you about a boy who lost his story. One morning, during the Luftwaffe bombings in WWII, Leslie Weatherhead found a little boy sitting alone in the burned-out remains of some 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 said. Weatherhead asked about his relatives. "They're all dead, sir," the little boy replied. Then he asked the young boy, "Where's your home?" He pointed down the street to a heap of rubble and debris. Then, Leslie Weatherhead said, "Tell me, son ... *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 fairy tales at bedtime ... all erased.

He had no past, 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 lies 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 a million facts, but haven't a clue as to what they mean. Modernism 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 that's a *lie*. We've 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, perhaps 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 4-year-old Coleman, he'd just look at me a little 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 18 years old and had just met Jesus, she prayed that she’d have four children by her 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. Colman, 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!”

You see, that story tells Coleman who he is, and it’s a seed pregnant with his future. If one day, he loses his job and his wife leaves him, saying, “You ain’t nobody – nothin’...” Well, calling the phone number of the hospital to verify the facts of his birth won’t help much. But the story – 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... and I devoured them all.

I’ll quote one of those love letters 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 little story 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 revealed persons. Her story might become my story... two might become one – a communion of persons.

Well, if someone said to me at CU, “Tell me who Susan is,” I wouldn’t tell them her social security 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!"

Both A and B are technically 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 Jesus said, "Have you been with Me so long, and yet you do not know Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

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." 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 ... the Gospel.

Last week, we preached on how the Word of God is the Gospel of our salvation. I Peter 1:25 says, *"The Word of the Lord is the Gospel which was preached to you."* That is, that *"God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son."*

*"All the promises of God find their 'yes' in Him,"* writes Paul. All of Scripture is about Jesus, Who is Himself the Word of God. Jesus *is* a love letter. Jesus, the Love of God come to us. Scripture is a love letter.

Love letters are full of stories, and even more, a stack of love letters, tied with a ribbon makes the greatest of all stories! Like this. See this? All of Susan's love letters, in a stack, tied with a ribbon. If you were to read this stack of letters, you would see a store 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, 'cause I know the end. But it was brutally hard for me to live through these letters. Some letters are happy, some despairing, some angry, some frightening. The Bible is a stack of letters, some angry, some profoundly sad, some sappy, 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, some are demanding: "Thou shall have no other gods before me." Some are historical: "And they nailed Him to a tree" ... "And the tomb was empty." Some are prophetic: "And I saw the New Jerusalem coming down adorned as a bride for her bridegroom."

All these different letters are bound together in the greatest story. All these letters were written in different times and in different places, written through different people in different cultures with different languages... A zillion facts, and yet one plot and one story:

The story of the Father redeeming His lost children

The story of the Bridegroom, Jesus, redeeming His unfaithful Bride

The story of the Spirit filling His temple of flesh

It's the story of God and us.

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, dies for our failures, and gives us His life: "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified," is the New Covenant. That's also called the "eternal covenant". In other words, "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified" was the plan all along. The Bible is His Story: The story of God's love; how God reveals His heart and wins ours.

The Old Testament is 34 books of history, poetry, songs, and prophecy. The New Testament is 27 books: four gospels telling the story of Jesus' earthly life, and Acts, the history of the Church. The New Testament is also composed of epistles, or letters, and it ends with prophecy. But from the start to the finish is the *story* of the unfolding of God's eternal covenant love. It's the revelation of Jesus.

It definitely contains rules, commandments, and laws. But they are all contained in a story... God's story. If you only trust the laws, you trust yourself and then you're religious and dead. If you trust the story, you trust the Author, and you're saved by grace through faith.

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, including all of space and 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. His story is the only real story, and His story is History. The Bible contains several plot summaries, and those plot summaries contain all of space and time.

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 the story – 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 all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Romans 11:32 is the summation of Paul's theology in Romans, the summation of his discussion on vessels of wrath and predestination. He writes, "*For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon all.*"

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, two perfections, two purposes of God. 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!

I've discovered very painfully that many folks get really agitated by those verses – the plot summaries. Maybe that's because they can't get these verses to fit inside some other verses, and maybe even more, they can't get this story to fit inside their own story. However, if these verses are the plot summary (Beginning to End), all other stories must fit into this Story.

I think the problem is: we want to write our own story. We want our will to trump God's will, yet His will is reality. So, to walk out of His story, and to write our own story is to walk into nowhere, nothing, and nobody – the Abyss. It's to walk into sin, death, Hades, and Hell... It is to be "lost."

Yet, "the Plot" came to seek and save the lost. And that's the story. The Bible reveals that everything is the story of Jesus, the very heart of God. And He is profoundly good – He is the Plot, the Word, the Story.

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 are not much different. We've stopped believing in the Story that reveals the Person Who saves. We believe in principles and programs, psychologies, sociologies and ideologies... LAW. So we come to church to get application points, and things we can do to make our life work, and to help us write our own story.

We come to church to write our story, rather than to hear *the* Story and commune with the Person Who saves. And then for us, Scripture is no longer the Great Story. It becomes the Great Cookbook for whatever soup we happen to be making. And yet whatever soup we make is death... it's "nobody, nothin'," and it can't save us. It's really nothing new. Throughout history, religious people have ignored the plot and cut up the story to use the pieces to write their own stories. They'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 hatred,  
just as the Pharisees cut up Jesus,  
just as Satan used scriptures to tempt Jesus,  
just as the Pharisees used scriptures to crucify Jesus – the Plot, the Story.

They cut up the Story, because they didn't like the plot. They cut up the Story to write their own story. We did it with the Living Word, and we do it with the written word. Well, the Bible isn't just a collection of deep thoughts, a book of virtues that we can cut up. 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. He was always telling stories. He is a Story. Grace is 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. Listen to the Story and behold, you’re an ingredient. But don’t listen to the Story, and you’re lost.

Matthew writes, “Jesus spoke nothing to the crowd without a parable – a story.” They 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 dog licked Lazarus’ sores.” – see, I think you’re supposed to picture 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 lying in the dirt. Then what does it feel like when the man, Jesus, says, “Neither do I condemn you.” 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, and then you find yourself in the story, and then you find the story in you. You ingest the plot, and it changes you.

After watching James Bond movies, I drive fast. I find myself in the story, and then the story’s in me. After reading *The Story of Love* and preaching that Story, sometimes I actually love. I don’t have to think about it, I just do. 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 the Plot through faith. And that’s why you pay attention to every event in a story, and that’s why you don’t panic at every event in a 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. In a Bond movie, “All things work together for the glory of James Bond.”

The Bible is a story, and everything is pregnant with the plot. Everything works together for God’s glory in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the story that God is telling, and it’s a good story. Well, imagine if your life was a good story that God is telling. Not only would it turn out ok in the end, but every experience would be transformed by the Plot. Each moment, you wouldn’t cower in fear, but you’d lean forward in faith and hope. They might launch grenades at you, your friends might betray you ... you’d have pain. But you’d lean forward in faith and hope: for now the story is getting good.

Well, the Bible is the Good Story, but is it all about you? Is His Story all about you? Is the plot all about you? Well, no ... Unless ... the Plot has *made* Himself all about you. Unless the Plot is in you. Unless Jesus came to commune with you and make His home in you, like you were His body.

For then, His Story would be your story, and your story would be His Story. It would all be about you, by grace. “All things would work together for good,” with you, by grace. When we have faith, we don’t just *seem* to lose ourselves and find ourselves in His Story, we actually *do* lose ourselves and find ourselves in Him... because He has placed Himself in us.

You see, every experience in your story is transformed through faith in Him: the Plot. The Plot changes everything, and makes all things new. Little kids know this. That's why they always pretend that they're part of a story. The Plot changes everything. But without a plot ... nobody, nothin'.

Imagine if this was your experience, and you didn't know the plot:

Movie clip from *Dumbo*:

[Dumbo's mother is locked in elephant jail. The older elephants start laughing at Dumbo and isolate him from their community, because of his big ears. He weeps alone in the dark, filled with shame over his big ears.]

If you were Dumbo, you'd think, "I'm a worthless elephant with big ears ... I'm nobody, nothin'." But because we know the plot, we want to yell, "Dumbo, have faith and courage! You're the most famous elephant in all the world! Everyone will see you, and get this: your *shame* will become your glory! Those ears are not a curse, they're a blessing, Dumbo!"

Imagine if this was your experience, and you didn't know the plot:

Movie clip from *Cinderella*:

[Cinderella has sown a dress for the ball. Her stepsisters see how beautiful she is and that she might be able to attend the ball. They begin to tear apart her dress. She is excluded and ridiculed. She's tempted to despair. It appears that she's just an orphan—a poor maid, whom no man will ever love.]

You'd think, "I'm a worthless orphan, a peasant ... 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 love story will be told to generations! Little girls around the world will pretend that they're you."

You see, we could do this with any clip in any story. And now you may say, "Well, I'm not Dumbo or Cinderella." Well, I wouldn't be so sure. For every story is His story, and His story is in you.

Imagine if this was your experience, and you didn't know the plot:

Movie clip from *The Passion of the Christ*:

[Christ is crucified.]

Now let me ask you: Do you ever feel betrayed? Do you ever feel forsaken? Do you ever feel guilty, lost, and ashamed? Do you know that Jesus came to wear your shirt, your skin, your flesh? On that cross, He bore the sin and sorrow of this world. He bore your insecurity, your shame, your failure, your "nobody, nothin'." He bore your "nobody, nothin'," which makes you "somebody, somethin'." But until you believe that, you're trapped in "nobody, nothin'." But when you believe, when you have faith in the plot, you find that your story (past, present, and future) has become His story. It's somehow nailed to that cross with Him. It's there on that cross with Him. This is the plan for the fullness of time: all things in Him making peace by the blood of His cross. That story becomes *your* story, and your story becomes Gospel.

So, Dumbo ... good news! Your shame becomes your glory. Cinderella, Bride of Christ ... Your loneliness becomes the deepest of all communions. Believer... your sin reveals God's grace. Your death becomes His life and your life. "Joined with Him in a death like His, you will surely be joined with Him in a resurrection like His." You die with Him and you rise with Him.

So not only is every event in your story transformed by His Story, the two of you have a shared story ... that's a love story. Stories store persons, so a communion of stories is a communion of persons. Lovers always share stories: "To have and to hold, for better, for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow... as long as we both shall live." Paul writes, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and may share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death."

*That's a love story.*

And now, I know that's a bit much... more than we can take in right now. So, I hope you can remember at least this much: Read your Bible in faith, for then you'll lose yourself in the Story and find the Story alive in you. That's the way the Jews were to read God's Story, God's Word. They didn't only read or remember the Passover, for instance; they smelled it, touched it, they ate 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, going 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 [bleepity bleeps]."

And 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?

Where 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?'"



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?”

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?”

He calls you to His table. If you come, you surrender your story to His story.

You ingest the Plot.

Come and worship.

Were You there when they crucified my Lord?

Were You there when He rose up from the grave?

For You see, His story has become your story.

*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.*