

## Chapter 2

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# A MASTER NARRATIVE

*The way we understand human life depends on this question:  
What is the real story of which my life story is part?*

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel  
in a Pluralist Society*

I love stories, and I love going to the place where there are more stories per square inch than anywhere: the bookstore. I will never forget one trip in particular. I was doing my usual thing—perusing the books, aimlessly looking for something that might catch my eye—when I randomly pulled out a book titled *The Artist of the Beautiful* by J. D. Landis. I had never heard of the author, nor of this book, but the title intrigued me, so I pulled it off the shelf and read the description on the back cover.

The fate of Swift River Valley holds a strange fascination for seventeen-year-old Sarianna Renway, a wayward student obsessed with the life and work of poet Emily Dickinson. In the small hamlet of Greenwich Village—abandoned, beautiful, doomed—Sarianna takes a job tutoring a minister's son.

Honestly, I wasn't interested. It was disappointing. But as I leaned in to set the book back on the shelf, I happened to read the next sentence in the description.

A man of deep faith, Jeremy Treat strives to instill hope into a town destined to be taken and lost forever.<sup>1</sup>

"What! Jeremy Treat? That's me! *I'm* Jeremy Treat." I looked around in shock, wondering if someone was playing a joke on me. And just like that, I was hooked. What had looked boring a moment before now had me entranced. Why? Now, it was personal. A story comes alive when you find your place within it.

There is another book that has had the same effect on millions of people over thousands of years. You may not find your name written in it, but you'll find your story. Because not only is the Bible the greatest story ever told, it is *the* story that makes sense of our lives.

## THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Whether sitting around a campfire, listening to a song, or watching a movie, we have all been captivated by the tension of an unfolding plot. Stories not only fascinate us, they also shape us. When I was a kid, I would watch the same movies over and over again so many times that I would start to see my own life through that narrative. My problems were kryptonite, my enemies were Lex Luthor, and my bedroom was a phone booth that would transform me into Superman. The stories we hear shape the way we view the world and ourselves.

Stories are not just for children, stimulating our imaginations until we grow up and live in the real world of logic and reason. Stories produce meaning in our lives. Bare facts are helpful, but

they only find coherence and have significance when they are placed within a broader narrative.

## IN SEARCH OF A MASTER NARRATIVE

We all live according to stories. But it's not the small stories that shape us most. We all long to see our lives as part of a bigger story. We are in search of a master narrative, a comprehensive story that answers the big questions of life.

Why are we here?  
What's wrong?  
What's the remedy?  
How will it end?

A master narrative is the story that frames your life and the lens through which you see the world. Take the American Dream, for example. More than just an idea, the American Dream is a controlling story that shapes the way many (even some living outside of America) think and live. The narrative of the American Dream answers all the questions of life. Why are we here? The pursuit of happiness. What's wrong? We haven't yet experienced the fullness of security, safety, and freedom. What's the remedy? We are—good, hardworking people who defy limits and create our destinies. How will it end? With a white picket fence, 2.3 kids, and a backyard so we can enjoy life without having to interact with our neighbors.

Few people would admit that they live by the narrative of the American Dream (or any other master narrative, for that matter). This is because master narratives are usually assumed rather than explicitly acknowledged. The stories we live by are less about what we consciously believe and more about what we take for granted. A master narrative is usually revealed by what is unquestioned or common sense in a culture.

For example, consider the common phrase, “Be true to yourself.” In American culture this advice comes across as virtuous wisdom. Being true to yourself, however, only makes sense in a hyper-individualistic society that lives within a larger narrative of self-fulfillment. If someone said, “Be true to yourself,” in a culture that values the community before the individual (which describes most cultures throughout the history of the world), the listener would be confused. “Why wouldn’t I be true to my family? Or my community?” In an individualistic culture, being “true to yourself” feels like commonsense wisdom. But that’s only because it’s heard in the context of a broader plotline that glorifies autonomy and culminates in personal satisfaction.

## COMPETING NARRATIVES

We all live according to a master narrative, whether we know it or not. But there are a variety of cultural narratives on the market, and there is competition for which of them will shape your life. Secular narratives tell the story of the world as emerging from the Dark Ages of religious fairy tales to enter the light of human potential and progress.<sup>2</sup> Many religious narratives are about souls escaping the corrupted material world for the bliss of an eternal spiritual existence. In the Western world, you’ll find a deep baseline narrative that is often held by religious and irreligious people alike. The functional master narrative of most people in Western cultures is one that places the sovereign self at the center of the universe and culminates in individual happiness. Our lives are defined by a story that is about “finding myself,” “following my heart,” and discovering “my best life.”

Here is the frightening part: *it is possible to have Christian beliefs yet still live by another narrative.* We can say we hold to the Christian doctrines of the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ, and justification by faith. We can identify as a Christian

and go to church on Sundays. Yet in our day-to-day lives we may still be living by a secular narrative that is about building our own kingdoms.

Take Rob, for example. Rob grew up in the church, believed the key tenets of the faith, and avoided the “major sins” in the Bible. Rob came to see me one day, wanting to know why God had let him down. Rob had done everything right but was not experiencing success in the career he believed God had called him to and hadn’t met the Christian woman he’d been praying for all these years. Rob felt like he’d done his part and was left wondering, “Why isn’t God doing his part?”

Have you ever felt that way? What’s really going on here? Did God actually let Rob down? I think Rob had been hijacked by a different narrative, a secularized version of the American Dream that promised fame for hard work and material blessing for spiritual focus. And he’d learned to reconcile this alternative narrative with his Christian faith by calling his career a “platform” for God. He had unrealistic expectations for a wife: the “Proverbs 31 woman” who looks like the girl on the cover of a magazine and won’t ask him to change. Rob was in a place many Christians in America find themselves today: mad at God for breaking promises that he never made.

Sadly, I believe many Christians today have been hijacked by a cultural narrative, and even worse, have learned how to baptize it with Christian lingo. In response, we need more than right beliefs with a bit of morality mixed in. We need a more compelling narrative, and that’s exactly what Jesus gives us in the story of the kingdom of God.