

Story of Scripture

In Search of a Master Narrative

Whether listening to a song, sitting around a campfire, reading a book, or watching a movie, we've all been captivated by the tension of an unfolding plot. Stories not only fascinate us, they also shape us. Stories produce meaning in our lives. Bare facts are helpful, but they only find coherence and have significance when placed within a broader narrative.

So we all live according to stories. But it's not the small stories that shape us most—what we did at the post office or how we ended up eating at one restaurant instead of another. We all long to see our lives as part of a bigger story—a master narrative, a comprehensive story—that answers the big questions of life: Why are we here? What's wrong? How can it be made right? How will it end?

A master narrative is a 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 the United States) think and live.

Why are we here? The pursuit of happiness.

What's wrong? We haven't yet experienced the fullness of security, safety, and freedom.

How can it be made right? We're good, hardworking people who can 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.

But few people would admit that they live by the narrative of the American Dream (or any other master narrative, for that matter) 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. The things

unquestioned or considered common sense in a culture reveal that culture's master narrative.

For example, consider the common phrase, "Be true to yourself." In modern American culture this advice comes across as virtuous wisdom. But it only makes sense in a hyper-individualistic society that lives within a larger narrative of self-fulfillment.

If you said, "Be true to yourself," in a culture that values the community over the individual (which describes most cultures throughout the history of the world), your 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 falls in the context of a broader plot line that glorifies autonomy and culminates in personal satisfaction.

And while we all live according to a master narrative, whether we know it or not, there are a variety of cultural narratives on the market competing 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. 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—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 sobering 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.

Maybe it's a secularized version of the American Dream that promises fame for hard work and material blessing for spiritual focus. We learn to reconcile such alternative

narratives with our Christian faith by calling our careers “platforms” for God. Then we believe the basic tenets of the faith and avoid the Bible’s “major sins” and are left wondering, “Why isn’t God doing his part?” Have you ever felt that way? Did God actually let you down? Or are you mad at him 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. 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.

Creation

While many Christians are familiar with the individual stories of the Bible—Noah’s ark, David and Goliath, Jesus walking on water—fewer know how these stories connect and fit together. Scripture is not a patchwork of morality tales; it is one grand story of God’s royal grace.

And Jesus is at the center. When, in Mark 1, he said, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand,” that’s the language of plot and resolution.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he was not simply discussing a doctrine; he was evoking an entire story: the story of God making his broken creation into a beautiful kingdom.

This story unfolds with twists and turns, sorrow and joy—the greatest plot in the history of literature—and climaxes with God’s loving reign, the earth rejoicing, and a people made new and flourishing.

The story of the kingdom of God is the master narrative for the people of God. It answers the big questions of life and gives a lens through which to see the world.

Why am I here? What is the purpose of life? The opening pages of the Bible answer these questions by showing God’s intention for the world. God created the earth out of nothing, and his plan was for it to be a glorious kingdom where all that he made would flourish under his loving reign.

Like most kings, God rules through his word. He speaks, and it happens. “Let there be light,” he said, and there was light.

Now, many people today, especially those of us in the United States, have not lived under a monarchy and the idea of a king feels foreign. Our understanding of kingship has also been tarnished by rulers throughout history who have used fear, violence, and oppression to enforce their rule and used their power for wicked purposes.

God is a different type of king, a good king. He rules with wisdom, justice, mercy, and self-giving love. God is as patient as he is powerful. As beautiful as he is strong. As merciful as he is mighty.

A good king.

God's power is guided by his love and is always in line with his character. He is the kind of king who uses his power to bless his people.

After speaking creation into existence, what God did next was shocking. The king of the universe stooped down, got his hands dirty, and created humanity from the dust, like a potter forming clay with gentleness and precision. The power of the king's word was matched only by the care of his hands.

Now, something interesting happens here in Scripture. God (*singular*) says "Let us (*plural*) make humans in our image," so "God created humanity (*plural*) in his own image (*singular*), ... male and female he created them (*plural*). What's going on here?

Well, God is one, and yet at the same time, three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This complex nature of God is called the Trinity. God, as one, is united within himself as a community of eternal love. God *is* relationship. The Apostle John was not being figurative when he wrote, "God is love."

So it takes relational beings in relationship with one another to bear God's image. These first humans conversed freely with God, enjoyed God's friendship, and walked with him in the cool of the evening. They were entirely safe, loved, trusted, and at ease with God, with each other, and with the entirety of creation.

The world was a place of *shalom*. We usually translate that word as "peace," but it means so much more than an absence of conflict. It's the deep, deep peace that only come through everything and everyone being in right relationship with one another. All was right with the world.

God made a garden in a place called Eden and put his people there, saying to them, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."

Unfortunately, many have focused so much on the prohibition of the one fruit that they've overlooked the invitation to feast on all the other fruits. The God who abounds in love and kindness created a world of delights and placed his beloved image-bearers in it with an invitation to enjoy. God is for our joy. He's not a cosmic kill-joy who makes life difficult so he can watch us suffer. Taste buds were God's idea. Sex was God's idea. Pleasure was God's idea. The first humans—Adam and Eve—had the freedom to eat, play, rest, and delight in the goodness of God's creation.

Being for humanity's joy, when God placed them among the delights of the garden, he did not give them a vacation. God gave them a task. Genesis 2 says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." God entrusted to humanity something very important to him. This was a call to responsible stewardship. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and called them to care for it, but he also called them to expand its borders to the ends of the earth.

Eden was a beautiful garden with order and harmony, while the rest of the world was wild and untamed. The world was good, but it was created with potential, full of resources that needed to be cultivated. Genesis 1 and 2 presents us, not with a final product, but with an unfinished project. Adam and Eve were called to Edenize the world.

Creation was designed to receive God's care and goodness by the hands of these human image-bearers. They would care for it as God would and both the world and humanity would flourish.

But everyone knows that something is wrong with the world. The joy and flourishing that we were made for has been tainted by the pain and brokenness that we experience in our lives. What went wrong?

Reflect

The story of creation is one where God speaks, and it happens. He uses this power to bring life and to bless. Where do you see evidence of this goodness in our world still? How about in your life?

Fall

A mysterious figure, a serpent later revealed to be the devil, slithered into the middle of the garden and questioned the woman with her husband present. The devil could not force either of them to sin, but he *could* introduce an alternate narrative.

So he questioned God's character by twisting God's words and persuaded the woman that God was holding out on her and she would actually become like God if she ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. *Why be ruled by God if you can rule yourself?* This sounded good to her husband, too, who did nothing to discourage her.

Desiring to know as God knows, they both took, ate, and "their eyes were opened." They suddenly knew they were naked, covered themselves, and hid from God. Humanity's first experience knowing good from evil was knowing what they'd done was wrong.

These beings specifically designed for relationship with God—designed to find their satisfaction, meaning, and security in God—chose to do life on their own and the trajectory of human history was changed forever.

Before, they trusted God and each other. Now, they hid from God and each other. And God, not wanting his creation to live in the pain of sin for eternity, banished the humans from the tree of life. Their perfect relationship with God and one another died and one day they would, too. Until then, their lives would be full of physical and relational pain.

When God's reign is received, it is experienced as grace. When God's reign is resisted, it is experienced as judgment.

This turning point in history is what we call the "Fall" and what Adam and Eve did is what the Bible calls "sin." God is for our good, but sin is our statement that we don't need him. However, a throne never remains empty. Sin is not only *rebellion* against God, it is a *replacement* of God.

Made to find satisfaction or meaning in God, when we look for them in money, fame, sex, career, or pleasure, it's a slap in the face to our Maker. It's a declaration that we want all that God provides but that we don't want God himself.

The Bible refers to these God-replacements as idols. An idol is anything you worship or live for in place of God. It is whatever sits on the throne of your heart, ruling your life and directing your desires, dreams, and decisions.

We're all ruled by something. Countless idols fill the marketplace of human desire: career, physical appearance, wealth, yearning for approval, longing for security, craving of fame.

But do not be deceived. Anything that rules over you other than God will be a harsh king. It will make promises it cannot keep. It will disappoint you, then blame you, telling you it's all your fault. Whatever you look to in order to satisfy you will end up enslaving you. The reign of God brings freedom; the reign of everything else leads to slavery.

The nature of sin penetrates deeper still. If I am the one who picks and chooses the idols I serve and decides what's right and wrong, then the ultimate object of my worship and devotion is not the idols of money, sex, or power—it is self. Sin is our attempt to dethrone God and enthrone ourselves.

From the garden a rival kingdom emerged. And the irony is that in all our attempts to rule ourselves, we end up submitting to the rule of another—the serpent king who deceived our parents in Eden.

Adam and Eve were originally sent out to spread the blessings of God's kingdom throughout the world, but instead they were banished and ended up spreading the sorrow and suffering of sin to the ends of the earth.

In the Fall, we see the pattern of humans responding to moral failure with good works done in their own strength, attempting to use achievement to cover shame. When we sin to cope with sin, sorrow, and suffering, we only cause more suffering and sorrow, which we then try to cope with through more sin.

But this is ultimately an attempt to cure self-rule using self-rule.

This always seeking to get to God or become like him in our own strength, wisdom, accolades, or efforts is exhausting and the more we try to do it on our own, the further from God and the deeper in our own selves and shame we end up.

The world was made good, but every aspect of it has been impacted by sin. It's not what it could be. We're not what we were made for. All will die, and only God can save us. But it will not always be this way.

God would not give up on his kingdom project. In an act of undeserved favor, in the middle of God's judgment of Adam and Eve and cursing of the serpent, God also created hope.

Sin had hardened the hearts of God's people and the soil of God's creation but, to borrow from the poetry of Tupac Shakur, a rose began to emerge through a crack in the concrete.

The Lord declared that while there would be enmity between humanity and the serpent, a descendent of a woman would one day crush the head of the serpent, although this victor would be wounded in the process.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God keeping this promise of a sacrificial, serpent-crushing king who would rescue God's people and renew God's creation.

Reflect

Read Genesis 3. When you know or feel that you have done something wrong, what do you do in response? How do you attempt to hide or cover?

Redemption

A pivotal moment in God's mission would involve a man who would become known as Abraham. Abraham was a moon-worshipping pagan from the land of Babel, the very place where human sin culminated in the attempt to build a tower to reach heaven by human effort, leading God to frustrate the builders' plans by dividing their language and scattering them across the earth.

God obviously did not choose Abraham because he had it all together, but by grace. The Bible is not the story of God finding good people and rewarding them; it's the story of God pursuing wicked people and saving them. God made a threefold promise to Abraham:

- To make his descendants a great people.
- To give them a place, the promised land.
- And through him to bless all the families of earth.

Echoes of Eden abound: a people, a place, and a plan to bring the blessings of God's reign to the ends of the earth.

Then God initiated a covenant. What is a covenant? A covenant is a binding agreement based on vows that creates a new relationship, making those involved as close as family.

That's how we use the word when we talk about marriage as a covenant relationship, and that's how God uses the word with his people. He bound himself to them by grace. As close as family. And as the Old Testament story progressed, God's kingdom came through a series of covenants, each different but related.

A remarkable tale of sibling jealousy, betrayal, redemption, and forgiveness led to Abraham's descendants living in Egypt, where they multiplied—quickly fulfilling God's promise to make Abraham's people numerous.

These people would eventually become known as the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. But they were not chosen to the exclusion of the rest of the world. On the contrary, Israel was chosen as God's vehicle to reach the rest of the world, as the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the families of the earth.

But they were subjected to slavery, so God redeemed them out of slavery in Egypt and set them on their way toward the promised land. What should have been a short journey turned into forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Eventually, God's people entered into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua and settled into the land under the kingship of Saul, David, and then Solomon.

But even though Israel was numerous, living in the promised land, and living under a God-appointed king, the root of their problem—human sin and rebellion—remained. God's grace was repeatedly met with hearts hardened by sin.

And just as Adam and Eve sinned against God and were banished from Eden, Israel chose their own way and were exiled from the promised land.

And while it's a page flip for us to get from there to the beginning of the New Testament, God's people continued to wait for 400 years. The Old Testament ends with a defeated people longing for the serpent-crushing king who could fulfill God's kingdom purposes.

Reflect

How would your life be different if you internalized—that is, trusted and relied on—God's love for you?

New Creation

Alexander the Great conquered the known world, including the promised land, imposing Greek culture and the Greek language everywhere he went. For the first time since Babel, there was a common language wherever anyone traveled.

Eventually Rome conquered the promised land and their sophisticated system of roads meant not only did Israel's known world now speak a common language, but travel to and from faraway parts of the empire had never been easier.

Conditions were perfect for God to move among his people and the whole world to hear about it. Then a young woman named Mary found favor with God, who caused her to conceive and give birth to a son with no earthly father. Jesus, the Son of God.

In most cultural narratives, the problem is “out there” and we are the answer. In the story of Scripture, we are the problem and Jesus is the answer. But Jesus is not a generic superhero. He's the Messiah, Israel's long-awaited Savior who would fulfill all of God's promises: a reconciled people and a renewed place, all flourishing under God's reign.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, he not only proclaimed the kingdom, he embodied it. Christ is a picture of God's kingdom in a person. Jesus' perfect life, however, was not enough to bring the kingdom of God. An example to follow was insufficient to save us from slavery to sin. We needed a savior.

The cross is Christ's throne from which he reigns with self-giving love. The essence of sin is our attempt to take God's place on the throne. The essence of salvation is God taking our place on the cross.

This is God's final covenant.

Through the gospel, God not only draws us to himself, but he draws us into his kingdom mission. The kingdom has already come in Christ but will not yet be fully realized until Christ's return. In between the already and not yet of the kingdom of God, Jesus calls his people to his mission.

One day the story will reach a complete resolution. When Jesus returns as king, he will renew all things—ridding the world of evil, reconciling his people, and renewing his creation—finally and ultimately making the world God's kingdom.

This final chapter of the biblical story is not a disembodied heaven with harp-playing souls floating on clouds. The goal is heaven and earth coming together—a new creation. What began as union with God, but went awry, ends as reunion with God.

This is why the Bible closes with a picture of Jesus on the throne, proclaiming, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Eternity is Christ reigning over and through redeemed humanity from every tribe and people and language and nation in a world renewed by grace.

New people, new family, new mission. Jesus changes everything.

And Jesus invites us to find our place in his kingdom story. The Bible is not a collection of moral stories that we imitate through works; it is a royal story of grace that we get swept into by faith. It’s the master narrative that brings coherence and meaning to our lives.

Reflect

What offer(s) of hope do you need to receive from the final portion of the Story of Scripture?