

## The Bible: Our True Story

### Sermon 1- “Life is a Story”

Passages: Ecclesiastes 3:1–11  
John 3:1–13

I want to start our 10-week sermon series by talking about the nature of stories. I do this because, throughout these sermons we’re going to be setting forth two premises: 1<sup>st</sup>, that the Bible is a story, and not only is it a story, but 2<sup>nd</sup>, it is the story in which all we must all find our own story.

All human life (everything we do) takes place within the context of a larger story. Let me show you: Imagine that you’re standing at a bus stop when a young man comes up to you and suddenly blurts out: **‘The Latin name of the common wild duck is histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus.’** Of course, you understand the meaning of the sentence. But you are forced to ask what is going on! Why is this man uttering such a strange phrase in the first place? What’s **the story** behind this strange occurrence?

You see, a person’s actions can only be understood when placed within a broader framework of meaning. That’s essentially what a story is—it’s a framework that renders a series of actions comprehensible.

So, let’s go back to the man standing next to you at the bus stop. We could speculate as to at least three possible scenarios that would make this incident meaningful:

1. The young man may have mistaken you for another person he saw yesterday in the library who asked, ‘Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common duck?’
2. The young man may have just come from a session with his psychotherapist who has been helping him deal with his painful shyness. Today, the psychotherapist has urged him to talk to strangers. The young man asks, ‘But, what shall I say?’ The psychotherapist replies, ‘Oh, just say anything at all.’
3. This young man may be a Soviet spy who has arranged to meet his contact at this very bus stop. The code that will

reveal his identity is the statement about the Latin name of the duck.

Do you see? Three possible scenarios, each of which gives a different meaning to the encounter at the bus-stop.

Your life is a story; so is my life. Indeed, there are 7 billion stories out there for 7 billion different people! And yet, as we shall see, although there are billions of stories, they all fit into just one story...one long, overarching meta-narrative that explains and connects them all! We might talk about 6 degrees of separation, but the truth is, the ultimate story of life on this planet connects us all!

Question: Can you make sense of your story without any reference to all the other stories? Can you make sense of your story without any reference to the Big Story that explains them all? I don't think so!

Imagine that have just walked into a movie that is already half-way through. As you sit there for a minute or two, you think you know what is going on—that is, you start to imagine the overarching narrative that helps to make sense of the things you are now watching on screen.

(Here's an example: It's a film called "Brazil", made back in the 1960's. I'm going to show you a random part of the film. See if you can work out the plot.)

Of course, most of us can't last very long before we are forced to whisper to the person next to us, "What's going on? Tell me the story!" It's only when you have the full story that you can finally relax into the story! Once you've got your bearings, you can easily understand the flow of events that follow.

I get the impression that most people in our world feel as if their life is a bit like entering into a movie that's already half over! They feel disoriented and confused. They don't understand their own life because they don't understand the big picture. They feel as if there must be something more, but they can't find it—it's out of their grasp.

I think it's the way the writer of Ecclesiastes must have felt! Here was a man who searched to understand the world. Above all things in life, he wanted wisdom. But listen to what he says in the very first chapter:

**<sup>12</sup> I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.**

In the narrow focus of his puny life, all he knows is that seasons come and go; that life is a repeating cycle of events which don't seem to inter-connect or make sense! Yes, he says, "**There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven! A time to be born and a time to die...**", etc, etc. But, in the end, if we don't have a bigger perspective, all these things are meaningless! No wonder he feels such despair! In verse 10 and 11 he says:

**"He has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they (we) cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."**

His point is very moving: "Sure, we feel eternity in our hearts, but this feeling doesn't help us to orient or stabilise us. In fact, it makes matters worse! We know eternity exists; we know it's out there. We even get to taste it sometimes, in the ecstasy of beauty, in the awesome experiences of life, in the deep joys of relationships and even in the harshest pains of loss. We catch glimpses of eternity-- but, we still cannot hold it all together enough to see where we belong in it all!

That's why, at the end of Ecclesiastes, the writer exhorts us: "**Remember the Creator in the days of your youth!**" What does he mean by that? Essentially he's saying that the only hope for understanding... the only way to make sense of life is to inquire from God. Remember Him... turn to Him... listen to Him as He tells the story of who we are in the light of eternity. Do it now, before your heart grows cold and you lose the desire to make sense of the big picture called life. **For unless God reveals something to us from His eternal perspective, we will never**

comprehend the disparate realities of life on this earth! It is this 'revelation' that we find in the Bible.

Now, of course, there are a lot of voices out there besides God's—voices which convincingly set forth their own 'big picture' of life on earth. These are called 'worldviews'. A worldview is an overarching story that tries to make sense of the world by establishing a series of assumptions about life which, in turn, drive human beliefs and behaviours.

- The ancient Greeks had a worldview—it was based on gods, like Zeus and Aphrodite, who controlled various elements of the world and who fought with each other to gain the loyalty of humankind. In this worldview, human beings saw themselves as 'pawns in the chess-game' of the gods. The object of life was, therefore, to appease the gods and get them 'onside'. (Although the Greek worldview died out, Hinduism still holds to this idea that a multiplicity of gods control the world.)
- Buddhism is another ancient worldview that continues today. This worldview, however, has no God or gods. Rather, it is basically focused around the problem of suffering. Buddhism explains the reasons for suffering (essentially ignorance and greed) and establishes a way (the 8-fold path) to escape suffering. And so, the ultimate goal of life is the extinction of desire which leads to Nirvana, the everlasting state of great joy and peace. That is the Big Picture.
- Christianity is another ancient worldview that springs from the text of the Jewish and Christian Bible. 'Scripture teaches one universal kingdom history that encompasses all of created reality: past, present, and future. . . . its vision of history extends backward all the way to the beginning of time and forward all the way to the last day. . . from the first creation to the new creation.' It's a worldview that claims that the Creator of the universe has an interest in the affairs of humankind and that each individual on this planet matters to Him. That's the Big Picture.
- One of the most recently established worldviews in the Western world is naturalism. Introduced in the 1800's by Charles Darwin, this worldview (also known as 'evolution') suggests that human beings are part of a natural chain of evolving creatures that all have their origin in the 'Big bang'.

The idea is that nature controls our destiny through a combination of chance, random mutation and the survival of the fittest. That is the Big Picture.

Now, of course, there are many other worldviews that we could mention (consermerism, Marxism, capitalism, individualism...). In fact, the modern trend is to try to hold two or three of these worldviews together at once! (This is called 'pluralism', where all worldviews are equally valid.) This, however, creates incredible tension! As Jerry Coyne (an evolutionary biologist) puts it, how could it be possible to hold both the Christian worldview and an evolutionary worldview at the same time? "Evolution strikes down the idea that people are specially created by God. Secondly, it says that there is no special purpose for your life – we have no more extrinsic purpose than a squirrel or an armadillo. Thirdly, it says that morality does not come from God; it is an evolved phenomenon. These are three things that are really hard for humans to accept, particularly ones from a religious tradition."

I think the only way you can hold to two worldviews at once is through ignorance—you don't know enough about either worldview to see the conflicts! Indeed, this is an increasingly common phenomenon today! Today, you can call yourself an evolutionist and a Christian because you don't understand the inherent conflict in these worldviews. And you call yourself a Buddhist and a Materialist because you don't understand the inherent conflict in these worldviews. You can promote the virtues of both Individualism and Marxism because you ignore the inherent conflicts in these worldviews.

This was the problem for Nicodemus that we see in John 3! He was a very religious person but his worldview, as a Pharisee, was one of legalism. This means that when he studied the Scriptures, he looked for laws and rules in the belief that keeping the rules is all that God desired! That was his worldview.

According to John 3, however, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Perhaps he was feeling the conflict inherent in his narrow worldview. Perhaps he wanted a bigger understanding of things.

Whatever his motive was for coming to Jesus, when Jesus questioned him on things like the ‘Kingdom of God’ and being ‘born again’, Nicodemus had no clue what Jesus was talking about! In the end, Jesus was forced to say to Nicodemus; “You’re Israel’s teacher and yet you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus couldn’t see the forest for the trees! His legalistic worldview narrowed his vision of what the scriptures was on about!

I think the most revealing part of the conversation comes at the end. Jesus makes allusions of a bigger picture—a heavenly picture—that, if Nicodemus is interested in pursuing, will put everything into perspective.

**<sup>11</sup> I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”**

Essentially, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, “I can open your eyes to the True Story of life...if you let Me!”

How many of us are just like Nicodemus? How many of us have been reading the Bible as if it were a book of law...of rights and wrongs... of duty and obligation...and have totally lost sight of God’s grand story of life and love couched in the dimensions of eternity?

A Hindu scholar in India once said to a missionary, “I can’t understand why you missionaries keep telling us that the Bible is the Christian book of religion. I have read it! It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! No! Your Bible is not a book of religion. It is a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.”

We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way there is no comprehensive grand narrative; there is nothing to help us withstand the power of all those other narratives that shape our culture.

That's why, over the next ten weeks, we're going to look at the Bible as a story...as the Story! To put it another way, we're going to look at the Bible as if it were an amazing movie ... a movie made up of a myriad of incredible moments of joy and pain, victory and defeat, failures and achievements. And although countless figures come and go, and although numerous heroes and villains march across our screen, not one of them is unimportant! Every scene adds something important to the suspense and the overall drama. **Even you are in the story!**

Perhaps you are a new Christian or someone who is new to this idea of the Bible as a Story. Indeed, it may feel as if you've come into the movie halfway through! Don't worry! We will allow you to whisper and ask questions to catch yourself up. We want no one to feel disorientated or confused as we pursue, what some have called "The greatest Story Ever Told!"

So...sit back and enjoy the show!

Let's pray.