

The Storyteller

Finding
GOD'S STORY
in
EVERY GOOD STORY

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The Storyteller:

Finding God's Story in Every Good Story

by Mark W. Weaver

<u>SECTION</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
	Introduction - God is the Master Storyteller—the Playwright, Producer, and Director of the greatest story ever told.	3
1.	Setting - Every story takes place somewhere. God created creation for His story's setting. And what a beautiful place it is.	4
2.	Characters - All stories have characters. Who are the character's in God's story? There are many. And the nation's particularly play an interesting role.	5
3.	Plot - A plot is the storyline set in motion by the introduction of the protagonist—and the revelation of the protagonist's goals.	6
4.	Conflict - Every story has conflict, the clash not only between good and evil, but between the wills of the characters. Conflict must be present because evil is real.	8
5.	Theme - All good stories are composed to convey a message, something dear to the author's heart that he/she wishes to convey.	9
	Footnotes	11

The Storyteller

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Romans 12: 20 NIV

ARE THERE SECRETS to the art and craft of storytelling? Can they be learned? Is there a divine story imprint upon creation? Is God a Storyteller?

For the Christian, no story is more beautiful nor more powerful than the story of Christ our Redeemer coming to earth, living among us, and offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. And regular readers of Scripture soon experience an epiphany when they realize that Christ's appearance on earth was not God's afterthought, but rather the fulfillment of His Master Plan from the very beginning.

Yes, God is the Master Storyteller. Since before Adam's first breath, God's story has been playing out across the stage of our terrestrial globe - a theatre of grand proportions. He created the sweeping drama of nations, kingdoms, tribes and souls.

Seeing a familiar design in every good story, I decided to write a short treatise to examine the art and craft of storytelling from a Godly perspective. My goal is to demonstrate that God's story is really the universal template for all good stories. In the same way that Scripture uses allegory ⁽¹⁾ to communicate God's message, this article will also employ the allegorical form to aid the reader. Sometimes allegories can assist us in portraying Biblical truths quite effectively enabling us to better comprehend God's nature, His character, His plans, and His purposes.

By studying Scripture we learn that life is not haphazard - that nations and individuals do not appear out of nowhere and that they do not exist without purpose. We begin to understand that history is actually an extensive drama crafted by God for His own glory. History is, after all, a story - His story.

Drama is defined as a succession of events or a progression of incidents having a starting and ending point and producing an emotional effect. Before actors are engaged in any dramatic production, three key positions must be staffed - playwright, producer and director. In the providential⁽²⁾ view of His story, God fills all three roles.

GOD THE PLAYWRIGHT. First, God is the all-knowing playwright, scripting a story laden with majestic themes - a story filled with conflict, failure, defeat, bravery, heroism and victory. As playwright, God insures that it is His story being told and that it is His heart which is being communicated. He masterfully crafts every unique character - both nations and individual souls. He foreknows how they will act, move and respond through every scene.

"The world 's a theatre, the earth a stage, which God and Nature do with actors fill.

Thomas Heywood:
Apology for Actors. 1612.

GOD THE PRODUCER. Second, behind every dramatic production, whether local theater, Broadway musical, or film, stands a second key player - the producer. The producer is the visionary who brings all the pieces together. He gathers the resources and has ultimate ownership over the final production. As the producer of history, God

The Storyteller

carries the entire burden for insuring the success of His story.

GOD THE DIRECTOR. Finally, between the playwright and producer stands the director. God fills this role too. He involves Himself intimately with every component of His historical drama. He is present at the production site, moving characters and props, setting stages and making sure the actors know their roles and lines. He oversees the production scene by scene. He selects costumes and supervises the construction of scenery, then coaches and instructs all of His players in their roles.

The beauty and majesty of the whole heavenly storytelling process is that God somehow manages to fill all three of these roles while still allowing for the element of free will amongst men and nations. What a marvelous, mysterious God we serve!

Stories come to us in many forms. Early mediums included written literature and theatre. Modern forms include film and television drama. But whether the story is about one singular life, a family, a group of friends, a slice from the history of a nation, or the whole of human history, every story contains the same five essential elements: setting, characters, plot, conflict, and theme. These five components, when woven together, become the fabric in which all of human experience is cloaked.

By studying His story, we can discover a great deal about the warp and woof of our own lives. More importantly, we can also learn of God's grander purposes and deepen our appreciation of His design for our world.

God is the center of all things, the great I AM⁽³⁾. He is the One who makes the nations

and directs their courses. As Playwright, Producer and Director, God creates these five story components over and over again with each new human life, with each new nation and with every church, every business, and every session of Congress.

Let's begin with a look at the setting for God's story.

1. THE SETTING:

EVERY STORY must take place somewhere. We live in a physical universe consisting of time, space and matter. But God's story begins outside of these temporal constraints. The few glimpses of the non-created that Scripture provides leave much to the imagination.

"In the beginning, God created..." tells us that before God inaugurated time, He had already conceived a plan. "Let us make man in our image..." provides a peek at the dialog that occurred within the Trinitarian society before God molded man's frame from the dust of the earth and quickened him with His very breath.

Our understanding of His story is of course limited to things created. For our discussion, the setting is confined to His creation, the cosmos. From the outset, God established an orderly, harmonious, universe. He created the heavens and the earth⁽⁴⁾. He took great care to craft the perfect environment for mankind.

God made the light, the expanse of the heavens, the waters, the dry land called the earth, and caused the grass and other fruits of the earth to sprout from seed. He divided the light into day and night, and brought forth

The Storyteller

creatures from the sea, the air, and the land. After each day, God appraised His activities and pronounced His work to be good. Finally, when all was ready, He crafted man in His image and gave him authority over all the earth and its creatures. He then declared His work to be very good.

Although eternity in God's presence is the destiny of the redeemed soul, creation is the setting for His story. He custom-crafted mankind and earth for one another.

Creation radiates God's glory. Danish author Isak Dinesen, in her book *Out of Africa*, described the beauty of her home in Kenya.

"I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. ... the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet [and] ... had not its like in all the world. ... The colours were dry and burnt, like the colours in pottery. The trees had a light, delicate foliage... the grass was spiced like thyme and bog-myrtle...The clouds ... struck the side of the hill and hung around it...The hills from the farm changed their character many times in the course of the day, and sometimes looked quite close, and at other times very far away. ...The hill country itself, ...is tremendously big, picturesque and mysterious; varied with long valleys, thickets, green slopes and rocky crags."⁽⁵⁾

Run your fingers through the soil of a newly tilled garden. Go for a walk after a spring thundershower. Drink in the crisp, autumn air and watch the colored foliage drifting to the earth. Stick out your tongue and catch a snowflake. Or if you are really adventurous, go for a walk in the desert, climb up the craggy side of a mountain, or don your scuba gear and survey a coral reef. Whatever hope we hold for heaven, whatever

longing we possess to be delivered from this earthly life, we are yet compelled to acknowledge that the earth is good. It is here, on this lush, rich, and sometimes stark planet, that God has set the stage for the telling of His grand story.

2. THE CHARACTERS:

IN STORIES, characters are present to demonstrate the process of learning and growing. Bible characters teach us about change and progress. God's word encourages us to grow in the grace and knowledge of God⁽⁶⁾ by desiring the milk of the word⁽⁷⁾, and by receiving the truth in love⁽⁸⁾.

Many diverse characters have participated in God's story. Some grow and some do not. Since Adam, God has been weaving a tapestry of individual souls, nations, kingdoms, tribes, and cultures. All press toward the fulfillment of His plan. We have learned much about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. But what about the nations? What role do they play in God's plan?

From Genesis chapter eleven forward, God's attention is focused on the nation of Israel. But a closer look reveals over 350 biblical references to nation or nations. In God's dramatic historical production, countless nations enter and leave the stage. And God, the **PLAYWRIGHT/PRODUCER/DIRECTOR**, is involved with every one.

What purpose does God have for the nations? Why did He create them at all? God established boundaries between the nations and determined their times and lifespans in history so that men would seek Him, reach

The Storyteller

out for Him, and find Him⁽⁹⁾. J.W. McGarvey, in *A Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, says that God allows the nations without divine revelation to remain to test them so that they might seek after the Lord⁽¹⁰⁾. God blesses the nations that learn and casts off the nations who do not⁽¹¹⁾.

What a marvelous variety of nation-characters God has created! God birthed⁽¹²⁾ the many nations and divided them into a melange of languages⁽¹³⁾. He created some nations to be stronger than others⁽¹⁴⁾. He placed nations into companies and alliances⁽¹⁵⁾. He allowed some nations to have noble laws while others frolicked in foolishness⁽¹⁶⁾. Sometimes He draws a new nation out of an old one⁽¹⁷⁾. He moves some kings and governors to respond to Him⁽¹⁸⁾ while he hardens the hearts of others⁽¹⁹⁾. He still uses one nation to punish another⁽²⁰⁾. Sometimes He destroys a nation, wiping it out completely⁽²¹⁾.

As characters in God's drama, nations, in many ways, are like men⁽²²⁾. Nations can receive counsel⁽²³⁾. They can rejoice⁽²⁴⁾. They can be afraid⁽²⁵⁾. They can craft and worship and serve their own gods⁽²⁶⁾. They can do God's will⁽²⁷⁾ and they can rebel⁽²⁸⁾. Nations can learn⁽²⁹⁾. Nations can seek God⁽³⁰⁾. They have memories and⁽³¹⁾ they can grieve and mourn⁽³²⁾. One nation can influence other nations—for good or evil⁽³³⁾.

Nations also have eyes⁽³⁴⁾ and ears⁽³⁵⁾. They can hear God's counsel⁽³⁶⁾ as well as ungodly counsel⁽³⁷⁾. They have relationships with one another⁽³⁸⁾ and speak to one another⁽³⁹⁾. Like individual souls, they share ideas and philosophies. One nation can ensnare another nation⁽⁴⁰⁾. They plan, and strategize, and make decisions, and determine their courses. As autonomous units they govern themselves. Most do so out of self-will. On rare

occasions, nations willingly submit to God's authority.

As director of His story, God knows every nation. Like individuals, nations have their own distinctive features. In God's own words, some are foolish⁽⁴¹⁾, some obstinate⁽⁴²⁾, some bitter⁽⁴³⁾, some hasty⁽⁴⁴⁾, some wicked⁽⁴⁵⁾, some righteous⁽⁴⁶⁾. Yet each one has a unique role to play in history. From Genesis to Revelation, we see God directing the course of every nation—for they were all created by His hand.

Although most stories have many characters, they are generally built around a primary character called the protagonist. Protagonists have positive goals. In God's story the protagonist is the community of His chosen people in the earth. In Old Testament times, Israel filled this role. Today, the Church is the protagonist in God's story.

Though nations and individuals are characters in God's story, the story is really about Him. Ultimately, God created the nations for His own pleasure and enjoyment. All that exists, exists for Him. "... for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." (Rev 4:11 KJV). Can we safely presuppose that in God's story, He takes special delight when nations, just like His individual sons and daughters, learn and grow and mature?

3. THE PLOT:

SO FAR we have discussed the setting and the characters in God's story. But all stories must have a plot as well. A plot is the storyline set in motion by the introduction of the protagonist—and the revelation of the protagonist's goals.

The Storyteller

As noted in the previous installment, the protagonist in God's story is His chosen people in the earth. Israel filled this role in Old Testament times and ever since the day of Pentecost, the Church has been the protagonist in His story.

God's people, both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church, were and are a nation among nations. The Apostle Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (I Peter 2:9 NIV)

The nation of God's people—the protagonist in His story—lives and walks among the other nations. Though the other nation-characters languish in confusion, the people of God are pregnant with purpose. They have been instructed and empowered to fulfill a specific task.

God set His story into motion in the very beginning—in the Garden of Eden—with these words:

"... Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Gen 1:28 KJV)

These are the first recorded words of God to man. Note there is nothing in this passage about fellowship, intimacy or communion with God. We could assume that Adam already enjoyed an intimacy with God. But then again, maybe he did not. We really do not know. What we do know is that God gave Adam a specific commandment—a mission! He told Adam to be productive, to populate the earth and to bring all the resources of the earth under his jurisdiction.

We see hints of this same mission in Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God. Jesus had much to say about the kingdom. But just what is God's kingdom? In simplest terms, it is that place where God is King. Clearly, God's commission to Adam represents His desire to see that the earth is brought under the care and management of Adam working as God's steward or representative in His creation. God desired to see His heavenly kingdom extended into the earth.

Of course Adam was not Israel. Nor was he the Church. Or was he?

Even a cursory look at Scripture and history reveals that somewhere on the earth at any moment in time, God has always had a remnant representative present. Between Adam's fall and the arrival of Abraham, we find Abel, Enoch, and Noah—three righteous men. And from Abraham to the present, God's covenant, both old and new, has been in play. God has never left His creation without someone to represent Him in the earth. In a sense then, the seed of both Israel and the Church were present in Adam when he received his commission from God.

What then is the plot of God's story? With the earth as the setting and God's people as the story's protagonist, God set the wheels in motion by announcing His goal—be productive, fill the earth, extend My rule, bring everything in creation under the management of My kingdom principles and precepts.

In essence, the protagonist—God's community of saints in the earth—has been charged with the responsibility of leading the nations to the throne of God. Jesus commissioned His Church to teach not just individuals but entire nations about Him and His ways⁽⁴⁷⁾. While the cultural mandate given to Adam in Eden's garden was the

The Storyteller

first goal, fulfilling the Great Commission is the protagonist's renewed goal and a secondary measuring stick against which the effectiveness of God's people will be measured. In many ways, Christ's Great Commission to the Church is the redemptive counterpart to God's original mandate to Adam.

How then is His story progressing? Let us take a few measurements.

What did the protagonist—the Lord's Vineyard, Christ's Bride—set out to achieve? What has she encountered along her path? Has she overcome obstacles? Did she accomplish her mission? What yet stands in her way?

The story—the plot—reveals in rich texture and colorful fabric, the protagonist's struggle to achieve the goal which God has set for her against many odds. Can we agree that we are yet in the thick of His story's plot as it continues to unfold around us?

In this series of articles, we have been examining the idea of God as the Storyteller. In the previous three installments we have discussed the setting, the characters, and the plot. In this installment, we will look at the necessity of conflict.

4. THE CONFLICT:

EVERY GOOD STORY has conflict at its heart. A well-crafted plot will portray both the internal and the external struggles of not only the story's main character, but in some cases, the ancillary characters as well. Conflict must be present because evil is real. Evil clashing with good is the quintessence of human existence in our sin-corrupted world—the result of man's free will at work.

His story in the earth begins with Adam, the first man, being placed into a beautiful garden in a location called Eden. Filled with many trees, the garden provided God with a testing ground for Adam. "Eat of any tree but one," God said. "You may ... eat of the tree of life and live, but do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for if you do, you will die⁽⁴⁷⁾."

Now another character enters the scene. He is God's archenemy and is known by various names—the Serpent, the Devil, Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Satan. Jesus called him a liar and a murderer⁽⁴⁸⁾. He embodies evil and his mission is to conflict with God, God's purposes, and God's people. Here, at the very foundation of human existence, he tempted Adam to question God's Word.

Let us backtrack for just a moment. In reality, God made this conflict possible. He gave man a free will—the ability to choose. Knowing that the serpent would provoke Adam to temptation, God nevertheless did not hesitate in granting Adam freedom. By allowing for the option of evil, God the Storyteller embraced the potential for conflict in His story.

We pick up the story at the point where Adam's "helpmeet," Eve, has already made her choice. How long did Adam deliberate on his choice? We do not know. Did he hesitate? Or did he jump right in after his woman? Just imagine the internal conflict. What we do know is that when all was said and done, Adam, too, had chosen the Devil's path and disobeyed God's commandment. From that moment, spiritual darkness and separation from Creator-God engulfed the earth.

But later, much later, at precisely the right moment in His story, Deliverance appeared. The Bible says that in the fullness of time,

The Storyteller

God's own Son arrived in human form to restore His elect to a right relationship with Father-God.

Once again we see conflict. Christ himself struggled. Would He follow His Father's plan or would He, like the first man, follow His own path? Every Easter, in thousands of churches all across the globe, the drama of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, His agonizing struggle in Gethsemane, His betrayal, His trial and sentence, His crucifixion and resurrection is re-enacted. Christ's story is indeed high drama. For He was in all points tempted as we are, but without sin⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Conflict cannot be avoided. Through the centuries, His story's protagonist—that's us, the people of God in the earth—has struggled to allow God to assume His Kingly place in our lives. We, the "holy nation" spoken of by Peter and noted in the last installment, have conflicted with the nations and kingdoms of this world since God first began to collect a people for Himself.

As we the Church pursue His goal of leading the nations to Christ, of extending the rule, the reign, and the government of God in the earth, we are continually confronted with obstacles, both natural and spiritual. The heart of the natural man is hardened to God, and the Devil remains relentless in his efforts to upset the purposes of God. His chief weapon is the lie. The lie and the Truth have waged war since Adam's first temptation in the Garden of Eden.

All stories have conflicts. But sadly, the good guys don't always win. Because evil is real, failure too is a reality. We take comfort in knowing that if we turn to the back of the Book, we discover that God and His people ultimately triumph in the end.

5. THE THEME:

WE BEGAN THIS SERIES by questioning whether we could find a "divine story imprint" upon creation, wondering if God might be a Storyteller. We posited that God fills three critical roles as Playwright, Producer, and Director. We also proposed five essential components found in every good story. Today we will conclude the series with a look at the last component—theme.

Read a good story lately? Seen a really good movie? Do you have a favorite book? What makes for a standout drama or a compelling literary work?

Stories that stand the test of time provide those they engage with an exciting setting, spirited characters, a spellbinding plot that moves the story forward, and gripping conflict. But the greatest stories of all provide something more—they give us pause and compel us to reflect upon grand themes.

Consider some of the great works of literature. Do you have a favorite author? Is it Dickens, Hawthorne, or Twain? Perhaps you prefer a contemporary storyteller. What makes their stories stick with you? Is it not the message, the theme, the authors are seeking to convey through their writing?

Did you see the film *Braveheart*? How did you feel when, strapped to the executioner's block, William Wallace (Mel Gibson) cried out for freedom? His call seemed to echo across the countryside as if he were beckoning to all of England and Scotland to cast off the chains of bondage and fight for liberty. Or how about *Gone With the Wind*? What message did the infamous Rhett Butler convey when he coldly responded to Scarlett O'Hara with the words, "Frankly my dear, I

The Storyteller

don't give a damn," then turned and walked out the front door?

A story's theme reveals much about the passions, convictions, and motivations of the playwright or author. Why did he write the story? What message is he trying to communicate? What is it that weighs upon his soul?

So many themes could be drawn from God's story. Every character in the Bible has a theme. And every Bible story has a theme. What lesson should we choose? Faith? Perseverance? Sacrifice? Mercy? Judgment? Grace? Patience? No one category even comes close to summing it all up.

Many would say that the most important theme of His story found in the Bible is revealed in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world ..." We could easily say that the theme of God's story is best expressed in three simple words—God and man. Certainly there is no theme of Scripture that grips us like the story of God becoming man, living among us in sinless perfection, sacrificing His own life on our behalf, and finally rising from the dead to overcome death itself. Talk about reading a good romance!

Nevertheless, His story is not only about men, but about nations and kingdoms as well. We, God's people, His story's main

character, have a mission in this *setting* called earth. We are to bring the lost nations to the cross and to disciple them until God's kingdom is fully established or until He returns. As His *plot* unfolds and the *conflict* with evil rages on, we begin to see another significant *theme* of God's story unfold. We find it in Revelation 4:11. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." (KJV)

Perhaps the theme of God's story is that He is worthy of honor, glory, and praise—for He has created all things, and all things, including us, are made for His own pleasure and delight. God's story is so theme laden that it's almost impossible to pin Him down to just one.

We began this series with this question: Are there secrets to the art and craft of storytelling? We then looked at God as a Playwright, Director, and Producer and explored the five components to good storytelling. Though some folks are naturally gifted as storytellers, there *are* secrets to the storyteller's art that can be studied and mastered. The most dramatic story ever crafted—once dubbed the "Greatest Story Ever Told"—serves as our highest model, the standard to which all storytellers can and should aspire.

Now, go find yourself a good book.

The Storyteller: Footnotes

Footnotes:

INTRODUCTION:

(1) al-le-gory n. 1.a. A literary, dramatic, or pictorial device in which characters and events stand for abstract ideas, principles, or forces, so that the literal sense has or suggests a parallel, deeper symbolic sense. Copyright 1992 *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary*

(2) Providence. The concept and belief that God is the power sustaining and guiding human history and destiny. "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." (Eph 1:11 NIV)

1. SETTING:

(3) Exodus 3:14

(4) Genesis 1:1-26

(5) Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1983), pp 3-6.

2. CHARACTERS:

(6) I Peter 3:18

(7) I Peter 2:2

(8) Ephesians 4:15

(9) Acts 17:27

(10) "that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him.' He here has reference to those nations who were without revelation; and means, I think, that one purpose of leaving them in that condition was to make a trial of their ability, without the aid of revelation, to seek and feel after the Lord so as to find him." J. W. McGarvey *A Commentary on Acts of Apostles, Seventh Edition* (Lexington, KY: Transylvania Printing and Publishing Company, 1872)

(11) 2 Kings 23:27, Jeremiah 31:37

(12) Isaiah 66:8

(13) Genesis 10: 5, 20, 31, 32

(14) Genesis 25:32, Numbers 14:12

(15) Genesis 35:11

(16) Deuteronomy 4:8

(17) Deuteronomy 4:34

(18) Daniel 4:34-37

(19) Exodus 7:3

(20) Deuteronomy 9:1, 28:49, Isaiah 45:1, Jeremiah 50:9

(21) Deuteronomy 19: 1, 31:3

(22) Numbers 14:15, Psalms 9:20

(23) Deuteronomy 32:28, Psalm 2:2

(24) Deuteronomy 32:23

(25) Deuteronomy 2:25, Isaiah 64:2

(26) Deuteronomy 29:18, II Kings 17:29, 33, 41, 18:33, 19:12, Isaiah 36:18, Jeremiah 22:11

(27) Jeremiah 7: 28, 25:15, 27:11

(28) Ezekiel 2:3

(29) Micah 4:3

(30) Zechariah 8:22

(31) Ezekiel 25:10

(32) Ezekiel 6:13, 14

(33) Jeremiah 25:32

(34) Isaiah 52:10

(35) Micah 7:16

(36) Jeremiah 31:10

(37) Psalms 2:2

(38) Genesis 35:11

(39) Isaiah 14:32, Jeremiah 31:10, 50:2

(40) Joshua 23:13, Jeremiah 25:32

(41) Deuteronomy 32:21

(42) Isaiah 18:2 & 7

(43) Habakkuk 1:6

(44) Habakkuk 1:6

(45) Leviticus 18:24, Deuteronomy 9:4

(46) Genesis 20:4, Exodus 19:6

4. CONFLICT:

(47) Genesis 2:16-17

(48) John 8:44

(49) Hebrews 4:15

