

Life's Big Questions (Week 6):

Is my story part of a bigger story?

Introduction

Is my story part of a bigger story? Is there a higher power who is taking little people like me and working my little story into a bigger story. Christians believe the gospel story is *the* story that makes sense of all of our stories that can feel small and seemingly insignificant. J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *Lord of the Rings* and a master storyteller, argued that, "The gospel contains...a story of a larger kind..There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits."¹ C.S. Lewis, himself a skeptic who was converted by the true, truth of the gospel story wrote, "Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened."² In an effort to help you answer the question of whether your story fits inside a bigger, true story, we're going to explore God's Big Story, a story of Good News known as the Gospel story.

Thought Experiment

Before we get into the story, let's conduct a thought experiment that will help you frame your story. Imagine something tragic were to happen to you today and you were killed in a car accident. You find yourself standing before God and he says to you, "How certain are you, from 0 to 100%, that I am going to invite you into heaven to be with me forever?" Stop for a minute and write down your percentage in the margin or on a piece of paper nearby. Now, imagine God asks you one more question, "Explain why you gave the percentage you gave. What is your rationale?" Write down a few bullet points that justify your percentage and we'll circle back to this thought experiment at the end of the story today.

BETTY--INSERT THE BRIDGE DIAGRAM HERE

God

Is a Loving Creator

The Big Story begins with God. God tells us in His word—the Bible—that He is the Creator of the heavens and earth and all that is within them, including you and me, and that He made us in His own image so that we could declare the glory of his works (Genesis 1:1,27; Psalm 19:1; I Corinthians 10:31). He created us out of love and for love and all of His creation was for us to enjoy. Except this one tree. He told us to stay away from it. Why? Because, remember, He

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien <http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2005/pdf/fairystories-tolkien.pdf> Pg. 23.

² <https://www.denverpost.com/2005/11/19/letters-of-c-s-lewis/>

created the world out of love and for love, and this would be one way we could express our loving trust in God, our creator.

Man and Sin

Man is a sinner

We'll come back to God in just a minute. But for now, let's introduce another major player in this story. God didn't create robots, He created humans. Humans, unlike robots, have a capacity to love because we have the capacity to choose. Tragically, Adam and Eve didn't choose to express their love to God by trusting Him; instead, they put their trust in a snake (Satan) who told them that they could be "like God" (Genesis 3:5). And they bought it, hook, line, and sinker (as we say).

In doing so, they joined Satan's team and the consequences were horrific. Graphically, this is depicted in the squiggly line drawn above—a line representing separation from God. Before our sin, Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with God. Then, lamentably, division entered their relationship with God and they felt tragically distant from God. He was holy; they were not. Shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, and all the negative emotions surrounding sin flooded them. They were no longer in perfect fellowship with God.

Like Adam and Eve, we all feel distant and cut off from God as well. Why? Because their sinful nature has been passed down to each one of us for thousands of years (Genesis 3:6-7) and we all feel the pain and the strain of being distant from God. In fact, God tells us that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and that not one of us is righteous (Romans 3:23, 5:12).

But what is sin? As we discussed earlier, sin is putting something else besides God at the center of your life (Matthew 5: 21-47). As we saw, we can do this with good things that we turn into bad things because we make them ultimate things (like work, relationships, success, influence, approval, etc.). They take center stage in our lives, not God. They become our functional gods and that is sin. While you and I did not take part in this tragedy with Adam and Eve, it isn't hard for us to see that sin is present in our own lives as well. Regrettably, this leaves us in the terrible predicament of being cut off from an intimate relationship with God, just like Adam and Eve. That's the bad news, and it's the reason in the diagram there is a chasm between God and man.

God Revisited

Yet, there is also good news (which is what the word gospel means), and the good news is centered in the character of God. God, our creator, is loving, merciful and gracious, and those three words make all the difference in the Big Story. So let's talk about those three character traits of God.

Love

"God is love" (1 John 4:8). Period. End of statement. So simple. So profound. All love flows from the one who is love. We're an expression of his love. The whole world flows forth from his

love. Because of his great love for us, God created us and chose to redeem us when we blew it.

Mercy

Thankfully, His love is mingled with mercy. Mercy is simply this--*not getting what we deserve* (2 Samuel 24:14). Intuitively, we all love mercy and are drawn to mercy because we all need it so badly. When my son Ford was 4 years old, he slugged his sister in the arm. I bent down and said, "Hey buddy, you know we don't do that in our house." He looked chagrined, eyes on the floor, until I told him, "But do you know what? I'm going to give you mercy." His eyes lifted off the floor, filled with question marks. You could almost see the ongoing calculus in his brain, "I wonder what this mercy thing is all about. Is it better or worse than the pow-pow I normally get?"

To put him at ease, I spoke up, "Buddy, you normally get a pow-pow (our term for spanking) when you hit your sister. Not today. We're giving you mercy, and mercy means you are not getting what you deserve." His eyes lit up with joy and mercy became his new favorite word, so much so that the next day, when another infraction occurred, he looked up at me with a grin and said, "Daddy, I want mercy." We all love mercy!

Praise God, because mercy is one of His fundamental character traits. It is how He is known. When God revealed his character to Moses, He passed in front of him and said, "Moses, listen up. if you want to know me and to see me, then here is what you must know about me." Literally, he said, "The Lord, the Lord God, *merciful* and gracious..." (Exodus 34:6). Moses, don't miss this: I'm merciful.

Hopefully, we won't miss God's mercy either. This is our God. Full of mercy. His heart has and always will go out to the ones He created in loving mercy, and in a million moving ways, he grants us mercy upon mercy upon mercy.

Grace

Yet, it isn't simply that He chooses to **not** give us what we deserve. Conversely, He gives us something we don't deserve called grace. The second way God describes himself to Moses (and to us) is with the word grace, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and *gracious*" (Exodus 34:6). We use these words synonymously, but Biblically, mercy and grace are distinguishable. Grace, in contrast with mercy, is *getting what we don't deserve*.

Let's illustrate the principle and the power of grace through the epic film and book entitled *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean, the protagonist, had been imprisoned for 19 years and, as a result, was treated like a leper when he was set free. No one would have anything to do with him, with one exception: the bishop. The bishop, much to the chagrin of the nuns, welcomed Valjean into his home, fed him, and gave him a bed for the night. Valjean awakened during the night and succumbed to his old ways. He stole the Bishop's silver and punched him in the face in order to escape. Shortly thereafter, Valjean was apprehended by the police and brought before the bishop.

The police, certain Valjean stole the Bishop's silverware they found in his possession, brought him to the bishop's house to confirm their suspicion. They pushed Valjean forward and said, "He claimed you gave the silverware to him." Holding Valjean's fate in his hands, the bishop

responds, “Yes, of course I gave him the silverware. But why didn’t you take the silver candlesticks? They are worth at least 2,000 francs.”³

Valjean stared in disbelief, and rightfully so—he had stolen from the bishop and beaten him. He deserved to be thrown back in jail, but grace interrupted the flow of things, and the bishop gave him a gift he didn’t deserve. And not just any gift. He gave him his most valuable possession (the silver candlesticks). Grace is costly. It always is. It cost the bishop, and it cost God to give us grace. It cost him His one and only Son.

CHRIST

Is God’s gift of grace

God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of grace. Grace took on skin. Jesus was, literally, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God’s Son was His gift of grace to the world. In doing so, God, through his Son, took on humanity (John 1:1,14) and lived the life that we should have lived (Romans 5:19). In fact, the Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in every possible way, which means He faced every temptation we have ever faced, yet, the crucial distinction is that He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He never gave in to temptation and, as a result, was in a position to execute the Great Exchange..

The Great Exchange

The Great Exchange means we exchanged our sinfulness for Christ’s righteousness, so that when God looks at us, He sees His Son who lives within us and counts us as righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). From an accounting perspective, it’s as if God deposits our sin in Christ’s account (the theological word is impute) and He deposits Christ’s perfect life (i.e. His righteousness) in our account. From a relational perspective, God promises to accept and love those who believe in Jesus just as he does his own Son, for he lives within us (Galatians 3:27, 1 John 3:1). But how does this happen? How can these gospel promises be fulfilled in a person’s life? Through two words: repentance and faith. If grace is God’s Christmas present to us under the tree, then faith and repentance are the response required to open the gift.

OUR RESPONSE: REPENTANCE AND FAITH

Repentance

Repentance involves a two-dimensional directional change in a person’s life. First, repentance requires that a person turn away from their sin—a horizontal change. For example, imagine that you intended to drive to Canada. When you were in Montana, you accidentally began driving south instead of north. When you realized you were heading in the wrong direction, your best bet is to turn around and head in the opposite direction.

In much the same way, repentance requires you to turn from your sin and head in the other direction, but here is where the analogy breaks down. Repentance is not telling you to simply turn in the opposite horizontal direction, but it requires you to turn to Jesus (Mark 1:15). Alcoholics Anonymous captured this powerful truth and has set free untold numbers of people

³ <https://www.amazon.com/Miserables-Blu-ray-Liam-Neeson/dp/B009H3LOOC>

through admitting that in and of ourselves we are powerless to change. We need to surrender ourselves to a higher power. Thus repentance requires a vertical directional change as well. If we do not turn to Jesus, we will be fighting a losing battle of trying to defeat the power of sin in our own strength. Jesus wants us to repent, to turn *from* our sin and to turn *to* Him, relying upon His strength to live a life that is free from sin's dominion and full of *saving faith*.

Saving Faith

1. **More than Belief:** You must understand that saving faith is not merely an intellectual belief--it's more than belief. The Bible acknowledges that even the demons believe there is one true God, but they are not *saved* by this belief (James 2:19). So faith is more than, not less than, intellectual belief. Yes, you must believe in certain things we have discussed, like the life of Christ, His death, and resurrection, but mere intellectual belief isn't enough.
2. **More than Feelings:** Second, saving faith is not merely a feeling--it's more than a feeling. You may have had friends say, "I need to experience God. I want to feel him, you know, to get God goosebumps." Yes, yes. We all want to feel the presence of God, but faith is far larger and more robust than a few God goosies. Let's put it this way. While faith isn't less than intellectual belief or feelings, it most certainly is more than either of these in isolation.

What Saving Faith Is

So what is saving faith? At its core, saving faith is making a choice to trust Christ (Acts 16:31, Romans 3:22a, Romans 4:5). It is more than belief and more than feelings--it involves a choice, a decision of the will. A story might help illustrate how saving faith moves you past both belief and feelings. A famous tightrope walker named Charles Blondin was looking for a challenge in 1859 and decided to stretch a cable across Niagara Falls. 25,000 people gathered on the banks "and, with scarcely an exception, they all declared the inability of Blondin to perform the feat...and that he deserved to be dashed to atoms for his desperate fool-hardiness."⁴

Now, imagine something that didn't happen historically, at least as far as we know. Imagine Blondin asking the crowd, "How many of you *believe* I can do this? If so, raise your hand." As we know from historical reports, very few believed he could pull it off, so it is unlikely any hands would have been raised. Undaunted, Blondin began walking across and in a relatively short period of time made it to the other side and back safely to a cheering crowd.

Now, imagine if Blondin asked a second question before attempting another feat. What if he said, "How many of you *believe* I can do this with a sack over my body that will cover my sight?" A few might raise their hands because he had already done the impossible. Regardless, Blondin pulled this off and actually accomplished this very thing on July 4, 1859. He then crossed again and again, ratcheting up the level of difficulty with ensuing attempts (flipping himself over on the wire, cooking meals, etc.).

Imagine one final follow-up question, "How many of you *believe* I can do this with a volunteer on my back?" After having seen his past accomplishments, it's not hard to imagine every single

⁴ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-daredevil-of-niagara-falls-110492884/>

hand going up expressing *belief*, but then imagine Blondin saying, “Now, please keep your hand raised if you are interested in volunteering to hop on my back.”

Therein lies the essential difference between *belief* and *saving faith* in Jesus Christ. Saving faith is more than mere intellectual belief that Jesus did great things in history (like rising from the dead). Even the demons believe in Jesus, but they don’t have saving faith in him (James 2:19). Saving faith means you are hopping on his back for him to carry you life and death and into God’s presence. In sum, saving faith is making a choice to trust Christ (Acts 16:31, Romans 3:22a, Romans 4:5).

CONCLUSION

To conclude our story, let’s go back to our thought experiment. We’re now ready to examine your response to God if something tragic were to happen and you died today. If you have saving faith in Jesus Christ, then you would be able to say to God, “I am 100% certain you will invite me into heaven to be with you.” While It may sound arrogant to be 100% confident, it’s actually not. In fact, it’s the most humble answer you could give because your percentage has *nothing* to do with you and *everything* to do with Jesus. If God asks you for your rationale of why you are 100% certain, you could simply point to Jesus, “I’m with him. I’ve made a choice to trust Him. I come on His merit, not my own.” Since we know God has already welcomed Jesus into heaven and seated Him at the right hand of the Father (Rms. 8:34), we know he will welcome you because you are with him. Using the Blondin illustration, you have hopped on the back of Jesus. He is carrying you. Or, put differently, it’s like being with an “A list celebrity” who can create access to exclusive restaurants and clubs, only far better because the club is heaven and Jesus is the only celebrity with access.

On the other hand, if you wrote down anything less than 100%, then there are two possible explanations:

1. **Religion to relationship:** You’re religious, but you’re not yet in a saving relationship with Jesus. Religious people believe in God but trust in themselves. You may have believed in God since you were a very small child. It’s time to move from belief in God to saving faith in Jesus. It requires a choice. Make that choice with your mentor or even right now as you are reading this. Simply pray, “Jesus, I am choosing to trust you. I believe you lived for me, died for me, and were resurrected. But I’m moving beyond belief. I’m in. I’m trusting you the very best I know how. I’m surrendering control. You’re King. I’m not, and I am getting off the throne of my life. Forgive my sin. Wash me clean. Give me your Spirit and the courage I need to follow you all the days of my life. I’ll do what you say do and go where you say go. Amen”
2. **Recommitment:** You’re in a saving relationship, but barely. You may “escape the flames” on judgment Day (1 Cor. 3:15), but you know in your gut that there is so much more available and so much more that God wants for your life right here, right now. The gospel--the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus--needs to grow in you. You may have committed your life to Jesus long ago, but you need a fresh start. You feel far from him and you want that to change. In the same way, Jesus is summoning you to make a choice to trust Him today. You need to renew the commitment you made long ago. Today is the day. The choice and the prayer is the same, “Jesus, I am choosing to trust you. I believe you lived for me, died for me, and were resurrected. But I’m moving beyond belief. I’m in. I’m trusting you the very best I know how. I’m surrendering control. You’re King. I’m not, and I am getting off the throne

of my life. Forgive my sin. Wash me clean. Give me your Spirit and the courage I need to follow you all the days of my life. I'll do what you say do and go where you say go. Amen"

Discussion Questions

1. Try to commit the Bridge Diagram to memory, then practice telling the Big Story to someone by sketching your own copy of the Bridge Diagram ..
2. What percentage did you write down in the thought experiment you first read the question? What was your rationale? What percentage are you at now? Discuss.
3. What is saving faith? Do you have it? How does it differ from belief and feelings?
4. Describe how the story about Blondin illustrates saving faith.
5. What is the Great Exchange?
6. What is mercy and grace? How are they different?

