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Why Am I Here?

One Story: Finding your Story within the Bigger Story series

Pastor Josh Luse

Growing up I had dreams of being this elite athlete, and so I would go to the gym and spend extra hours shooting hoops. I'd see those banners on the wall and think, "Someday we're going to have our banner up there." I would continue to work, and I got into this program that was supposed to help me increase my strength and my vertical leap and my speed. Every week we would do these workouts. They were pretty intense, and at the end of them we would finish and we would go to this treadmill. Now this treadmill wasn't like the treadmill you see at the health club. This thing had steps that would lead up to it—was like a treadmill on steroids—and you would get up on this thing and this thing would go about 90 miles an hour. It had this bar in the front of it for safety that you could grab onto. This thing had inclines and declines that you would almost need a rappelling rope to run with as you're doing this. So every week I would continue to just workout more and more with this until we would get to the end of the program and it's time to test on all these things.

So I test on the strength part and get through with that, and I would test on these other tests. At the end we'd go to the treadmill. So I get on this treadmill, and they are going to see how fast you can go—what your top speed is. Now there was a top speed in the 20s that was the Cheetah Club, and I thought, "I want to be in the Cheetah Club." And so you would get up on this thing. You would stand beside it—10 miles an hour it would be going. You hop on for 6 seconds…5, 6, and you would hop back off, and they would increase the speed. So I did 10,11,12, then get up to 15, 16, 17, get up to 19,20 miles an hour and at that point 21 miles an hour! So I get up there to 21 miles an hour, and I'm ready to go on this thing. I test the belt, see how fast it is going, and it's going a lot faster at that point. So I get on and I'm running and I start getting towards the back of the treadmill—and I envision myself flying off of the end of it and splatting on the wall, so I hop off. I walk back up, pump myself up, and I step back on, and I'm running about 2 seconds into this. I don't know if you guys have had this experience while you are working out or while you are lifting or any of these settings where your body decides it's going to start turning into jello. But that's what my body starts to do at this point. So I'm about 2 seconds into this and my body is turning into jello. (And also, I was a high school guy and we had trainers, and the trainer I had been assigned was this girl in college, and so I thought I would make an impression on her through all of my athletic ability here.) I'm 2 seconds into it, and my front foot hits the heel of my back foot, and I start to go down. As I'm going down, I lunged for the bar and I grab it, and there's this sense of "Yes!" But then my rear end hits the belt *(laughter)* and my shorts decided to travel 21 miles an hour down to my shoes. *(laughter)* So now I'm hanging on to this belt, my shoes are getting just shredded by this belt *Zzzzzzzz*, and I look over, and the trainer's just going, "What do I do?" I look at her and say, "Shut it off!" She shut it off, and I got back up, and I'm pretty sure I made an impression on her that day... *(laughter)* ...not quite the impression I was trying to make.

But what I realized is that life is full of stories—some funny stories, some fun stories, some good stories, some painful stories. But I believe that the best way to understand your story—the best way that I can understand my story—is to look at the bigger story, and who I understand myself to be is shaped by the dominant story in my life. So today we're going to take a little journey together. We're going to try to unpack the whole story together. Let's start at the beginning. In Genesis, as we start in, it says: **In the beginning God...**

Now remember, at this point there's nothing—nothing to smell, nothing to see, nothing to taste, nothing except God—and God was there because that was enough and within this Triune God existed three Persons. There's an incredible relationship within this One God. As you start to try to figure it out, it's one of those things that just makes my mind start to spin. But God in three Persons experienced this perfect relationship. It's the kind of relationship that you and I dream of maybe in a marriage or maybe as a kid with our parents—this deep, loving relationship where there's no thought of self that comes before the thought of the other. It's the kind of relationship where I'm constantly just looking to serve the other, where I'm looking to tell them how incredible they are, how much I love them, how valuable they are! I'm looking to provide for them and protect them. I'm looking to lift them up with such joy and pride. As we read through this story, we find that this is the experience that God is having. But in this experience—this Father and Son—it's so incredible and He wants to invite us into this. In fact, Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 describes the intimacy of this relationship—so tight knit it describes them as **One**. So into this, God begins to create. Colossians chapter 1 verse 16 describes His creation this way:

> **For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.** (*NASB, Colossians 1:16)

So God begins to speak, and as He speaks, whatever He speaks comes into being. As it reaches the pinnacle of His creation, in Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, He makes us in His own image. He breathes the breath of life in His most prized possession: people. Later He goes on to call us His masterpiece. And remember, in this story He didn't make the stars and the earth and the skies so that He could have a place to live. He didn't need that. He created it so He would have a place to live with us. That's really important to remember as we journey through this story.

But the story rolls on, and there's this tree and this snake and this decision. You'll remember they're in this perfect utopian place, experiencing this relationship with God where He's laying out His perfect law and love before them. But with any relationship there is risk. And oftentimes you and I, within a loving relationship, have risk and that will lead to fear; that will lead to us trying to control. But with God there is no fear; there's perfect love. And so He gives us a choice; we have a decision to make. Adam and Eve are in the garden. They have a choice of whether they are going to obey God and what is laid out before them, or whether they are going to eat from this tree. Don't make the assumption that somehow they are starving and this is something to fuel them, or that this is an incredible delectable dessert that's right before them. The choice here is whether they are going to believe what God says is true and follow Him, or whether they are going to choose to reject that—reject worshiping Him and instead try to take His place in the story.

And so one day this mysterious snake comes into the garden, and they eat. He lies to them—he continues to lie to this day! They take from the fruit and they eat it, and all of a sudden the story changes. Evil and death enter into God's perfect world. An author once said that every great story has a character that wants something and has to overcome conflict in order to get it. From this point on there's a problem because where once we had experienced this perfect relationship with God—being with Him, walking with Him, talking with Him—now we are separated, living in a world that He has created for us but saturated and soaked in sin and death, and now living in exile from Him. But before Adam and Eve leave, He gives them hope—this promise that one day through Eve's line He would send a hero, a rescuer that would come. There would be this epic battle that would take place and within this battle this hero would crush the head of the snake. In the process it would bruise his heel. So they wait. From this point on in the story, He continues to give pictures, and these different symbols and these things that would point to this rescuer that would one day come.

This story would be passed down from generation to generation and so many would continue to choose the same choice that Adam and Eve had made...until we get to Noah.

Don't get me wrong; Noah wasn't perfect. But in Genesis chapter 6 verse 9 it says **Noah was a righteous man** and that he **walked with God.** He desired to be with God. Verse 11 goes on to say that **the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence.** So God sent this flood to cleanse the earth and people of corruption. God chose to partner with Noah in a covenant following the flood. It's just so interesting to me because a covenant is made between two people—two parties that are involved. But God promises that never again will He destroy the earth like this. And what does Noah have to do with his side of the deal? Nothing! It's into this story that we start to see God's Law and His perfect ways, and His Law unfolding. But then we see this scandalous thing called *grace*.

I think another important thing to remember as we journey through this story together are the names that are mentioned. Now you and I, when we chose names for our kids we say, "I like that name," and so we put it into place and we have our name set. But oftentimes throughout the Old Testament, they would take these pieces of God's name and bring it into the name that they were giving out. So you would get these names like "El" or "Ya" or "Jah" that would come into the form of these names. You'd hear about these people through the story like Elisha...El. Elisha which means, "My God is Jehovah," or another way we can say it is, "God is salvation." Or another one Daniel... Dah'nay'el, which means, "God is my judge." Or another one Joshua...Yehoshu'a. He was this mighty warrior leader, and his name meant, "The LORD saves." And it's so fascinating to me how their names contribute and play a part into this bigger story as well. We meet another guy; his name is Abram. What is interesting is other names were made from just words that they would take and they would form into a name like Abram. His name meant, "exalted father." When I think of it, it's kind of interesting. Why would you name your son, exalted father?

"Hey, I'm looking for names."
"How about *Good Father*?"
"Sounds good to me."
"Alright, so we have Good Father. This is my son, Good Father."

But God would go on and continue to give him a new name—Abraham—which meant, "Father of a multitude." Once again our story meets a person, not a perfect person, but Abraham takes steps of faith to follow and join God. And God makes a covenant with Abraham that He would make him a father of a great nation, that He would give him a vast amount of land where he could live with his descendants, and that all of the world would be blessed by him. Then He shows him this: He takes him out and shows him the stars, and He tells him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. What blows my mind is that one day one of those stars will shine brightly down, pointing to that Rescuer that they are waiting for. You will want to follow along with me in Genesis chapter 15. We are going to read just a little bit about what had taken place right there. Verse 1:

> **"Do not fear, Abram,**
> **I am a shield to you;**
> **Your reward shall be very great."**
> **Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will**

come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." (Genesis 15:1-7)

And Abraham's family grows. God does give him a son. They grow larger into a tribe, but they also grow into dysfunction. Nevertheless God gives them the name Israel which means, "God strives" as He relentlessly pursues these people. They are supposed to be this new kind of people. They are supposed to be a people that others look at and they would once again show the world what it meant to be with God...to walk with God. And they make strides and they fail, and they make strides and then they fail again. From Abraham to his son Isaac to his son Jacob to his son Joseph, we continue to see this pattern unwinding and unfolding until they find themselves exiles in Egypt and slaves. It's there that once again God raises a leader among them: Moses whose name means "drawn out of the water". And He gives Moses a covenant, and this covenant is to this whole people group of Israel. They have grown into a tribe; they have grown into a nation. They are supposed to follow this set of laws, and if they do, God will bless them. And in Deuteronomy chapter 7 Moses is speaking to all the people. Listen to how personal he addresses them in his message from God. Deuteronomy 7 verse 7 says,

"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face. (Vs. 7-10)

You start to see the tension that is building in the story as God is giving this covenant. In Exodus 19 it tells us that Moses gets the Law that people are suppose to do. Verse 8 of chapter 19:

All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!"

We continue to see this faithful God keeping His covenant but this covenant-breaking people continuing to make mistakes. In fact in Judges chapter 2 verse 1 it says:

"I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you...But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? (Vs. 1b, 2b)

The second that Moses is going down from the mountain, he finds the people have already built this golden idol, just like all the other nations. They have turned from God, and they are worshipping this idol. We start to think, "How can this exist? How can God's perfect, just ways and His forgiving grace-filled love exist?" You wouldn't want to walk into a court room after you have been

wronged and have the offender sitting right beside you and the judge look at him and say, "Well, don't do it again." If you were living in injustice, you wouldn't want the rulers to just wink at the injustice and turn the other way. So, how do these two things work together? Well, let's go back again to Genesis 15 and let's look a little bit more at this covenant that God had given to Abram. Genesis chapter 15 verse 9 says,

> **So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.** (Vs. 9-11)

What in the world is going on? We read through some of these stories—throughout this story—and we think, "This doesn't make any sense. I don't have any clue what is happening here." One of the things that is so important to understand as we read this story is to understand the culture that they are living in, and the elements that contributed to that culture. Bryan has said it many times that throughout this Old Testament story, it was a bit like the old Wild West. There's no overarching government to give protection to all the people. There is no social service there to make sure that everyone is getting provision. It was families and clans that would bond together, and they needed that in order to survive.

The area that they were in was pretty small. I mean modern day Israel is the size of New Jersey, the fifth smallest state in the U.S. So, you have all these people groups that were on top of each other in this area and the terrain: you had these rocky hills; you had these deserts; you had these mountainous regions, and then there were a few fertile areas. And there were just a couple of areas that were key in the trade routes between the North and the South and the East and so you had people all on top of each other and a pretty violent culture! So, any board game players in here that have played *Settlers of Catan*? Yeah, it's like that but with a ton more deserts, right? (We'll play that later on today, okay?) Or maybe for my younger generation this is like *Fortnite* without any resources. This is just a huge battle that is taking place.

And we don't speak often of covenants, so when we hear covenants, we think, "What in the world is that?" Maybe when we hear that we hear it at a wedding—the only picture we really get where law and love come together in this mutual beautiful relationship. But even back then the stakes were higher. If you were outside a covenant or you were outside a family, man, it was impossible to survive on your own! So there are these covenants that start to take place within this civilization, and they can be made between individuals or among tribes and nations.

There were two primary kinds of covenants. One kind was made between equals—two groups or tribes or nations would come together. They would put their resources on the table and they would say, "Hey, we're all kind of equal." So if somebody comes to attack, whoever was in this covenant, they would all come in and they would all band together to help—and they would mutually help each other. But there was a second kind of covenant, and this covenant was made between a stronger power or party and a weaker one—so maybe a lord or master and a servant, or a large nation and a small tribe. In this covenant the larger would come in and they would give them maybe a place to live. Maybe they would give them protection when other larger armies moved in, and in turn this smaller side, the smaller party, would pay tribute back, or they would give a portion back every year to this larger party. They would come and they would set the table for this working mutual relationship. Now, on the one hand there are these blessings—these things that you would receive—but on the other hand there are these curses. If you didn't keep your end of the deal,

something would happen, and remember this is an oral culture. It's not that you came to the table where there was a dotted line and you signed your name. So what they would do is they would have a ceremony, and they would actually have a cutting of a covenant. They would take one of their most prized possessions, an animal, and they would cut it into pieces and they would form this gruesome bloody aisle. Then they would walk through this gruesome aisle as part of this covenant ceremony as if to say, "If I don't keep my end of the deal, may what happened to me be the same as what has happened to these animals." This isn't like a contract; this doesn't have an end date. When you enter into a covenant, this is forever! This is permanent—the stakes are pretty high!

Now think of this and what has just taken place. If Abram and Moses later, reflecting back on this covenant, and Abram is sitting there the whole day looking prepared for this covenant ceremony. On the one hand he is thinking, "Okay, God has met me; He is giving me blessing. He has continued to let me ask questions. He has shown me His grace and kindness. But on the other side, I have a part to play in this covenant and I know I'm an imperfect person, and I know the consequences if I don't keep my end of the deal." So I wonder what is going on. Chapter 15 verse 12 continues to speak to this:

> **Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror *and* great darkness fell upon him. *God* said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."** (Vs. 12-16)

Wow! We start to see the Author of this story is in control of this story. We start to see that He has a plan that He is unfolding, but also we see that He's got a perfect way that is set before them, but He has love and grace and the compassion that He is continuing to show to the Amorites, waiting for them to repent, to turn back to Him. Then we go on in verse 17 where it says:

> **It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared* a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying,**
>
> **"To your descendants I have given this land,**
> **From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:** (Vs. 17-18)

Holy cow! You can so easily read over this, missing what just took place. In a covenant ceremony they would never have the master walk between these pieces, and yet God shows up in this smoking, flame-firing expression—the same that we see in Mount Sinai—and He passes through the pieces—the stronger in the covenant relationship! And what's incredible is that Abraham never walks through! In essence God is saying, "I will give you the blessings of the covenant, and if you don't keep them, I will take the penalty—your penalty—for this covenant. That's just like God. He's always ready to walk through the messy places in our lives. But Israel would go right back to forgetting God. They would lust after other gods. They would lust after money and sex and power. All the while God would continue to pursue them. In Judges chapter 17 in verse 6, in fact it says this several times in Judges:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

It sets up the next season within our story where the Israelites look around at all the other nations that have kings and they say, "We want a king!" Now why in the world would you need a king if God is leading you? But God allows them to have a king, and they chose a king, Saul. They chose him on all the outward appearance things that the world would do. Saul's name means "The one they asked for," and he fails. So another king is chosen. But this king is a little different. This king is not like Saul. He's a shepherd, a humble shepherd. He's not even the first born. He's going to make mistakes...big mistakes. But the Bible tells us that ***he is a man after God's own heart***. God meets this king David, and He gives him a covenant and He tells David that his heirs will be the royal heirs to the throne in Israel—that one day a king would come that would set up a kingdom that would last forever. He wouldn't be a king like they were thinking. He would be much more like a shepherd.

Once again, Israel would fail. They would rise and fail. They would have kings. They would be exiled into Babylon, out of their home once gain. We see prophets and priests and judges that would continue to come through this story—all of them having jobs to point people back to God, to show people the ways of God. They would continue every now and then to speak of this *New Covenant* that would come one day.

Then we enter into 400 years of silence between God and His people. Then at one point God finally sends an angel to this young Jewish woman, telling her that she is carrying the One that we've all been waiting for. He was fully man and fully God. He lives this perfect sinless life. In fact He lives a life that fulfills all of our side of the covenant, all of Israel's side of the covenant that they haven't been able to keep. He does—and with this He forgives and He loves and He speaks with power. Just before His death, He has twelve of His followers with Him. They are sitting around a meal, and He takes bread, and He breaks it and He takes wine and pours it out. Then He tells them this is the New Covenant just for them that comes through His body that is broken; His blood that is poured out. And just after this, He goes to the cross and He takes the penalty that we deserve. He fulfills the covenant. It is incredible! This is the story that all of the other stories have been pointing to. He is fully man—this is the Hero! And yet He is fully God! He doesn't stay dead. He rises on the third day. He has victory over death! He shows up and He's talking to different people and meeting with them. In Luke chapter 24 verse 27 in this conversation with them, he says:

Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Then in verse 44 He goes on to say:

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
(Vs. 44-47)

He spent some time here on earth before He went back to be with His Father. When He went back, He sent us a gift—the Holy Spirit that lives within us. Then He plants the church here in the world

to once again show people what it's like to live with Him. If we read on in the story, we know that one day in the future He will come back again as the Hero—conquering evil and sin and that snake Satan forever—and restoring this Garden of Eden back into this beautiful city where we can once again live in together with Him!

So, what in the world does this story have to do with you? Although we know the end of the story, we are not there yet. We are still in and a part of this story. So I wonder, "What story are you living with your life? What is your story about?" In his book *After Virtue*, McIntyre says that we can't understand the meaning of something without a story. And he gives this illustration of a man walking up to him at a bus stop and he's saying, "*Histrionicus*. *Histrionicus.*" It's this common name for this duck, and as he's in this moment he's thinking, "Without a story I have no clue what this guy is talking about." Maybe this guy is studying ducks and he just thought of the name he needed. Maybe this guy thought he was somebody he knew and was answering a question that he thought he asked. Maybe this guy is just a little crazy. I don't know, but without a broader story I don't know the meaning of what just has taken place here. Without a broader story, I don't know if we can find the meaning in our lives. And some of us will just live lives about other things. Maybe your life is being lived kind of for something like this. Go ahead and roll that video:

(Video of Local News Story of Morningside Christian's State Basketball Championship)

Speaking of state champions, the Eagles of Morningside Christian completed a bit of history yesterday. Home video, yes, from Kansas City, the Eagle boys captured the regional state championship for the big school division for Christian schools for the first time ever in that bracket. A 70-58 championship win over Mission-Os from Kansas City, capping a 19-3 season the last 17 contests ending in Ws. Chris Hammelman, Nathan Dyke, and MVP Josh Luse with that roller there, all grabbing regional team honors.

Wasn't quite expecting that...kind of a big deal! *(clapping)* I'm surprised you hadn't heard of that at all. *(laughter)* I guess the treadmill paid off. How sad would it be if twenty years later I'm sitting here telling you, "This is my story." "Buddy, it's time to give up the glory days." This was a small school and I realized I wasn't even the best guy on the team. But through this I started to realize the ways that God has made me, because I could help to start to bring out the best in other players, start developing these abilities for me to help teach men as a leader in this. It was actually basketball that brought me around this area. It was basketball that gave me the opportunity to one day go into youth ministry that landed me here. I realize that my story is not about basketball. It's a part of it but that's not my story. There are athletes that get to the pinnacle of their success. They get to the top. They can't go any higher but they say, "It's just not enough!"

My story is not that I'm a pastor. My story is not the car that I drive. My story is not about my bank account. My story is about one thing and that is Jesus, and pointing other people to Him! And yet we can so easily forget about that story. We can be like the Israelites and continue to forget. Tozer said, "We think having found God, we need no longer seek Him." But I wonder what your story is sharing, what your story is writing?

Let me ask you this. What stories can you share about your life with God this week? I wonder how He might be using things this past week to play a part in His bigger story from your life. I wonder who is talking about you this week because you've pointed to Jesus. You see we can often live lives just for ourselves. Do you realize that this week in your story was a page in your story? There are no wasted days. There are no bonus extra ones. In fact, for some of us it may have been a chapter in our story. None of us knows how long our story is. One of my favorite authors said this. "Nobody

would want to go to a movie and pay money and sit down to watch a story about a guy who works for years to get a new car and at the end of the movie, as the credits starts to roll, he's driving off the lot testing the windshield wipers." We would be so disappointed; we would want our money back. What a horrible story, and yet we spend years of our lives actually living those stories, and we expect our lives to be meaningful! You see, when people plan their stories around themselves and they get to the end, they realize that their stories were empty. But just like the people in the Bible—real people—God has a story that He wants to write with your life. It's all part of His bigger story, and if you woke up this morning, it's because God is not done with your story!

Jesus, thank You so much that You are the author of life. God, no one could have done it any better than You. God, thank You so much that You have relentlessly pursued us, God, and there very well may be people in this room that have yet to turn to You and to trust in You and to follow You. God, I pray that this day would be that day for them. And, God, there are others in this room like myself that we forget. We get so distracted and sidetracked and all the other busy things around us in life that we forget what the bigger story is about. God, would You use this to remind us about Your bigger story and the part we play in it even today. God, would You give us a hunger for Your Word, to dive into this to learn more of Your story and, God, would You use our lives to impact other lives. God, would You help us to write a story worth telling. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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