

Preface to Stay in the Story

The purpose of this book is to comprehend more deeply the drama of God's great salvation history. This is an approach to the Bible that I would have benefitted from at the beginning of my formal theological education. Like so many Bible and theology students I started out by taking language studies and courses in theology and hermeneutics. I enjoyed classes that delved into background information on the text and explored the latest critical studies. I studied works by famous biblical scholars and theologians and did research on higher criticism, form criticism, and the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation. I found these courses and my professors fascinating. In fact there was very little in the seminary curriculum that I didn't enjoy or imagine myself teaching someday. I liked it all: systematic and historical theology, church history, evangelism, and missions. But something was missing in my theological education and ministry preparation that I wasn't aware of until years later. I spent several years studying theological German and Latin and exploring every facet of Latin American Liberation Theology. I read Augustine for the better part of a whole academic year and sat under brilliant scholars, but I could not have explained to you the importance of the prophet Zechariah or the impact of Isaiah. I knew the trends of modern theology better than I knew God's salvation history.

I grew up in a home that practiced the spiritual disciplines and encouraged a devotional life. For family devotions we read from *The Daily Bread* and a short passage of Scripture that the devotional guide recommended. In my personal devotions I read Oswald Chambers and kept a journal of my daily Bible reading. Thanks to my parents who lived out the kingdom lifestyle long before it was called that in popular evangelicalism, I was nurtured and instructed in a home that embraced the Word of God seriously. But I still didn't have a sense of the big picture of salvation history. Much of the Old Testament was foreign to me, like the old and forgotten stuff that got stored in our attic. I heard a zillion evangelistic messages at our church, but almost nothing from the biblical prophets.

During my high school years our pastor focused almost exclusively on the apostle Paul, but it was Paul through the narrow lens of our subculture, rather than the great epic of salvation history. I knew a lot about "getting saved" but not a whole lot about the comprehensive meaning of salvation. Looking back, I sense that my family had an intuitive grasp of the message of the prophets and Jesus' kingdom ethic, but we didn't see how it all fit together. We had pieces of the puzzle but not the big picture. Except for a few famous psalms, the riches of the Wisdom literature were hidden from me. Biblical books, such as Leviticus or Numbers were basically ignored or, when thought about at all, regarded as anachronisms for New Testament Christians. Forays into confusing books like Ezekiel or Daniel were usually for the sake of discovering a devotional thought for the day. I used the book of Revelation to fuel my curiosity more than to deepen my courage.

Although good in themselves, my devotional experience of the Word and my graduate theological education conspired to conceal my ignorance of the sweep and drama of salvation history. My experience and my scholarship produced an unintended and hidden deficiency—a trained incapacity to see the big picture and feel the drama of God's story. My well-intentioned

devotional subjectivity and specialized expertise had unwittingly obscured the Gospel story. I was left with a piece-meal understanding of the Bible and at the time it didn't bother me that large portions of the Bible remained relatively unknown to me. What I was missing was a coherent understanding of the compelling unity of the Word of God.

The purpose of this series is to take the whole counsel of God seriously. Paul gave us three good reasons for mastering this material when he gave his memorable charge to Timothy: "All Scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). First, the material we are studying is alive with the very truth of God, reason enough for us to give it our full personal attention. Second, it is preeminently effective in transforming us for the better from the inside out, and third, it is the necessary resource for doing every good work. The Bible is the most trusted and useful tool for personal transformation, social advancement and life fulfillment known to humankind, but the truth it proclaims has to be understood to be effective. Such was the reality of the incarnation that Jesus himself studied the Bible to understand his own identity and mission, how much more then should we study the Bible to understand our part in the only story that redeems our story.

Our desire is to discover God's great salvation history, the truest of true stories, and embrace this meta-narrative as our own. We aim to start at the beginning in Genesis and work our way through the Bible chronologically to grasp the totality and fullness of God's sovereign plan of redemption. We will trace the time-line of God's actions through the course of the only history that redeems all of history. Instead of isolating Jesus from salvation history we will seek to understand Jesus and our discipleship in the light of this providential trajectory of humility and triumph. We want to stay in the story of Jesus Christ and his grace, for the sake of fulfilling our mission, growing in Christ and doing theology. The student should acquire an ability to describe the course of salvation history through each biblical book, to highlight the major theme of each book, and to explain the interrelationship of each part to the whole. Everybody has a story but only one story redeems our story. This is the coherent, compelling story that we seek to comprehend and communicate with all our heart and mind.

Chapter 1 Introduction to Stay in the Story

Get in the Story

"We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." 1 Corinthians 2:12-13

On my way home from work one day I listened to Julia Sweeney's story, "Letting Go of God" on National Public Radio's *This American Life*. Her youthful tone of innocence and her spirited story-telling kept me listening. She didn't sound like she had an axe to grind. A more serious and

manly voice, like Bertrand Russell, logically explaining in a monotone why he wasn't a Christian would probably have turned me off. But I was hooked on Julia's amusing journey into unbelief. In just twenty-nine minutes and without uttering a harsh word, she attempted to shred the credibility of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

I assume NPR broadcasts a one-woman monologue like Julia Sweeney's without rebuttal because it is classified as "entertainment." Equal air-time applies to Democrats and Republicans. It does not extend to disputing biblical truth claims. "Letting Go of God" was never meant to be a serious piece anyways, but only a clever and arty human interest story. That's the subtlety of the situation, because Julia's monologue is a serious and disarming criticism of the Faith. Under the cover of a human interest story, Julia Sweeney has waged her sweet attack against the Bible with innuendo, false associations, and misleading impressions.

Julia begins her story with a visit by two Mormon missionaries, who came to her door with a message from God. And before she knew it, these two Mormon "boys" launched into the story of Mormonism, beginning with Lehigh's visit to America from Jerusalem in 600 BC. She found the whole thing, Joseph Smith, the gold plates, the heavenly family, all utterly incredible and silly, but then she realized that the only reason she found Catholic Theology credible was because she was used to it. Who could honestly believe that God impregnated a virgin who had a baby who turned out to be the Son of God. Her conclusion: Mormonism and Catholic Dogma are equally ridiculous.

Nevertheless this encounter inspired Julia to explore her faith. She was raised Roman Catholic and had found it to be a great experience, but she had never really studied the Bible. So she started attending a Bible study in her local parish. But the more she read the Bible the more disillusioned she became. She found the Bible contradicting itself all over the place. She found contradictions in the first two chapters of Genesis. She thought people who claim the Bible is true must not have read the first two chapters. She was shocked by God's judgment in the days of Noah and appalled by the sordid tale of Lot and his daughters. "I knew the Bible had nutty stories," she said, "but I guess I thought they would be wedged in amidst an ocean of inspiration and history but instead the stories just got darker and more convoluted, like when God asked Abraham to murder his son Isaac. As a kid we were taught to admire it. I caught my breath reading it. Admire it! What kind of sadistic test of loyalty is that to ask someone to kill his or her child? And isn't the proper answer, "No, I will not kill my child or any child."

For Julia the Bible is filled with creepy sacrifice-your-offspring-stories, archaic hard to imagine laws, and unbelievable conclusions, like the one found in the last and, as she says, the most odd ball book of the Bible, Revelation, that claims only 144,000 people will get into heaven. There is no theological context for her interpretation, only an odd assortment of shocking stories that are offensive to her and make no sense. She flits through the Bible with an attitude that if its in the Bible the Bible must endorse it. This leads her to judge the Bible as condoning rape, polygamy, child-sacrifice, etc. Her conclusion, "Some people argue that without the Bible, morality would be relative and wishy washy, but in the Bible morality is relative and wishy washy. In fact it sure seems like our modern morality is much more loving and humane than the Bible's morality."

Jesus only adds to her disappointment. She finds him much angrier than she imagined. She claims it is hard to stay on Jesus' side when he says hateful aggressive things. It is "downright crazy" when he curses the fig tree just because it doesn't have figs. But the most upsetting thing about Jesus for Julia are his family values. He seems to have no ties to family and he discourages his converts from having any contact with their families. She accuses Jesus of doing the same thing the cults do when they try to separate you from your family so they can inculcate you into their crazy cult. Everything she says is cynical to the core but said in such a sweet and innocent way that her audience is bound to take her word for it. When she says, "The Bible, the good book, the good news, the gospel," her tone is pure mockery. The whole thing makes her want to ask Bible-toting church goers if they had ever bothered to read the Bible, because, as she says, "if you cared enough to look inside you would find that you opened the door to an insane asylum, with a bunch of crazy people walking around inside."

But in the end it is not just the sordid tales and crazy stories that bother Julia but the whole point of the New Testament—that Jesus came to die for our sins, "as if someone can suffer for our sins." From Julia's perspective what's the big deal about Jesus' suffering? By comparison, Julia's brother, who died from cancer suffered a whole lot more than Jesus did. "So, okay Jesus suffered," she says in a condescending tone. "I mean Jesus apparently suffered terribly for one may be even two days. I heard someone say once that Jesus had a really bad weekend for our sins." For Julia Sweeney the whole thing is absurd. "Why would a god create people so imperfect, blame them for their own imperfections, and then send his son to be murdered by those imperfect people to make up for how imperfect those people were and how imperfect they were inevitably going to be. I mean what a crazy idea."

Having reached the conclusion that all she could appreciate about the church was the stain glass windows, the religious art, the songs, but not the words, only the melodies, it wasn't very long before Julia realized that there was a tiny little thought that whispered, "There is no god." As she says, over the course of several weeks, God disappeared altogether. She had finally let go of God. She realized that life is random, her thoughts were completely her own, there is no justice, and that nothing happens to us after we die. We just die.

I finished listening to her story and I wondered what C. S. Lewis would say to Julia. How would the great twentieth century convert from atheism to theism to disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ respond to an entertaining skeptic who had let go of God with such clever confidence? I wished I could say something to Julia that would cause her to rethink her conclusions, but I was certain no careful logic, much less a series of bullet points would change her mind. In the 60's believers contended with tightly reasoned disbelief, but today, we are entertained by personal stories of disillusionment. Instead of a fully armored reasoned assault on the truth, a fashion conscious skeptic like Julia, is conveniently dressed in subjective attitudes and first impressions. Flippancy, sarcasm, irony, and humor are the preferred weapons of unbelief. In the court of public opinion, today's skeptic is looking for a quick dismissal of the Bible, not some long-dragged out serious discussion of the truth. With a well-timed joke or an amusing anecdote, she hopes this whole business of Christ and the Bible can be "laughed out of court."

Christians should not be surprised that the new forum for such matters is entertainment. Discussing the Bible has been off limits in the public school classroom, for allegedly violating the laws of the land, and out-of-place in the university for being unworthy of intellectual consideration. That leaves few places outside the church and home where the Bible can be discussed seriously. And even in these places, the culture of entertainment is so pervasive that serious discussion about the truth is nearly impossible. Television substitutes for the forum of the family meal and churches feel the pressure to entertain. Culture critic Neil Postman warned that this is what would happen in a culture dedicated to amusing itself to death. Christians by virtue of their commitment and devotion to Christ are ill prepared to excel in the field of entertainment. Besides, the Bible doesn't work well in light-hearted discourse. It is like trying to tell God's great salvation history story on the David Lettermen show. Something gets lost in the translation. But Julia Sweeney could tell her story on the Lettermen show to the amusement of Dave and the audience would love it.

I would really love to have an in-depth conversation with Julia about the gospel, not to debater her, but to reason with her—to have a discussion on the Story. Our purpose might be to take a fresh look at what she finds so contradictory and crazy in the Bible. I'm not sure the conversation would change either of us, but she might see the Story in a different light. She might. But we can't do this kind of work over sound bits and anecdotes, we have to apply our minds and hearts to this kind of work. Julia has concluded that life is random and death ends all—that's one hell of a conclusion. So this work is going to take time, a lot longer than 29 minutes, but the time will be well spent. Julia has nothing to lose and everything to gain.

God's Spirit

Julia Sweeney may think her winsome wit cuts down the Faith like a chain saw ripping through a hundred-year old oak, but there is no need for people to panic. God's testimony prevails without clever words and personal anecdotes, through a demonstration of the Spirit's power that we could never control even if we wanted to. God's story has never been impressive to "the wisdom of this age" or to "the rulers of this age," or for that matter to the entertainers of the age. We should not be surprised if the metanarrative of God's salvation history story does not appeal to the world. It never has, not even in the age of Constantine or the era of Eisenhower. Whenever Christianity has become really popular in culture, invariably it is because it has morphed into something else. That's the problem with Christendom, it co-opts the story and uses it to showcase worldly wisdom and power. It tries to make Christianity popular and reasonable by substituting a moral plan and a religious program for Christ crucified. Christendom forgets that the central thrust of the story focuses on Christ and the Cross.

Our responsibility is to tell the Story without sending mixed signals. We speak "a message of wisdom among the mature" but it is not the wisdom of this age. If the cultural elite understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. The imperial self—the ruler of this age, is incapable of embracing this message. In every age it's the same. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). The

unbaptized imagination fails to see the significance of the Story. The “spirit of the world” naturally concludes that there is nothing but randomness and death, but the Spirit of God reveals what God has freely given us. Left to ourselves we are blind and deaf to the sights and sounds of salvation. The contrast between these two radically different spiritualities is extreme, nothing less than life and death. The “spirit of the world” vacillates between tragedy and comedy, between Nietzsche’s dark nihilism and Julia Sweeney’s delighted disillusionment. Today’s culture prefers distraction over despair and seems content with amusing itself to death. But the work of the Spirit counters this indifference to the truth and enlivens the senses to the most real world of God’s creating and redeeming.

The apostle Paul tells us all this is to put the “burden of proof” on the Spirit of God where it belongs. Telling the story is not a matter of human ingenuity and cleverness, but of humble dependence upon the Spirit of God. This is God’s Story to be told in God’s way through God’s people. Human wisdom cannot unlock God’s secret wisdom. The “best” and the “brightest” miss this open secret, because of their fallen human logic and self-styled spirituality. This hidden wisdom hides from sinful human pride, but is powerfully revealed by the Spirit of God. Such wisdom is neither esoteric nor ethereal, but is as concrete and down-to-earth as Jesus and his cross. Paul summed up the difference: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain.
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

William Cowper 1731-1800

God's Linguists

In northern Ghana one of the most important positions in the tribes is that of "linguist." Second only to the chief, the tribal linguist is responsible for telling the story of his people. Like the chief, his position is inherited by birth. He carries the responsibility of being the tribe's spokesperson, the chief's advisor, and, most importantly, the guardian of the tribe's oral history.

Normally a “linguist” refers to a person who is an expert in languages, one who analyzes the syntax, structure, and systematicity of languages. Linguists can decipher a language and break it down into its component parts. Through careful study they know how a given language is suppose to work technically. But the term *linguist* in Ghana applies to a person who *uses* language to communicate, rather than observes how language is used. The tribal linguist is more of a poet than a technician.

In the Janga tribe the tribal linguist was by far the most interesting person to observe. To the delight of the gathered crowd he danced his way from the chief to our visiting delegation, transforming protocol into a memorable event. Anyone could tell that he enjoyed the art of communication and everybody agreed he really knew how to tell the story. He used his poetic flair, personal charisma and passion to proclaim the history of his people.

Janga's tribal linguist is an example of what the followers of the Lord Jesus are to become. We are to be God's linguists. We are, in Paul's words, to "guard what has been entrusted to [our] care." We are to "turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim 6:20). We are to do our best to present ourselves to God as true craftsmen, who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). Jude urged us "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). The analogy seemed to work well for the African pastors, who readily embraced the idea of being God's linguists.

Like the Janga linguist we are born into our responsibility. "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God." Peter continued with a word from the prophet Isaiah, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever" (1 Pe 1:23-25).

When the people of Janga see their tribal linguist they see so much more than a little old man. They see their history, their tradition, and their culture. In fact they see even more, they see the pride of their history, the meaning of their tradition and the joy of their culture. Isn't this how it should be with us? God meant for our lives to embody the gospel message, so that when people see us they see Christ.

Missional preparation, whether in the church or seminary, will be strengthened greatly by embracing salvation history as a whole. The revelation of God in history places our study of the biblical languages in perspective and saves us from obsessive attention to detail. God's truth does not rise or fall on a particular textual variant, nor does biblical interpretation hinge on the latest biblical scholarship. The depth and complexity of the Gospel story weans us away from relying too heavily on abstract theological terminology. It is not our burden to justify the ways of God to people; it is our privilege to proclaim the way to God according to his Word.

God's Story is far more compelling than our theological abstractions and formulas. Those who teach and study systematic theology may be better served by dwelling on the powerful stories of the God of Moses and the God of Job than by listing attributes of God with Scripture texts. Those who teach historical theology may lay a better foundation for understanding the Christological debates of the early church fathers by showing how Jesus fully revealed the God of Israel.

Comprehending the fullness of the Gospel story is imperative for learning how to preach. No matter how much preachers attend to the clarity of their thoughts and the effectiveness of their style, if the driving force of God's truth is not shaping their message then they are bound to fail, even if their sermons are well-received. I believe pastors have a "cover-to-cover" responsibility to teach and preach the whole counsel of God. A great deal of preaching tends to be piece-meal and heavily reliant on incidental anecdotal material. Preachers unintentionally interrupt God's Story with their own human interest stories. Everyone has a story, but only one story redeems

our story. It is time we concentrate on that compelling, convicting, life-saving Story.

Missions has rightly stressed the importance of contextualizing the Gospel and the real danger of cultural imperialism. However, missions has often done this in a peculiarly western way by proposing new theories and speaking in the abstract. If Missions began with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and told the story of how God has made himself known in history through cultures for time and eternity then we wouldn't be beset by so many theories. Every nation has a story, but only one story is for the nations. It is that Story that needs to be told and that Story that needs to shape the telling.

Instead of "dumbing down" the Gospel story and editing the Canon for what we find relevant, we ought to let Salvation history shine in all of its complexity and mystery. The truth of God revealed to us in the Bible and through salvation history deserves our careful attention. It is ironic that as our culture has become more sophisticated in its methods of communication it has insisted on a simplistic message. As the speed of communications has increased so has our apparent impatience with the message itself. But it is here that we have to resist the reduction of the Gospel to sound-bites and insist on comprehending the whole counsel of God. I can't help but believe that there are many people who long for a passionate, in-depth proclamation of God's story from Genesis to Revelation.

Telling the Story

To tell this story well, we have to be in the story to share the story. It has to be our story. In a deep, internal way, we need to be able to sing, "This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long." It's pretty sad if the heavens are declaring the glory of God and the skies are proclaiming the work of his hands and I am belting out "I did it my way." God's Salvation History Story overshadows the chaos of our dysfunctional family history and the pain of our broken marriages.

"In the beginning God" is not only the beginning of the truest of true stories, but the beginning of the most important story we have to tell. Some claim that there is no overarching true story, only personal individual stories. But Christians believe otherwise. They believe there is an overarching true story; a meta-narrative that is neither myth nor fiction, but true history. The use of the word *story* should not diminish our confidence in the history of God's revelation. Behind this story there is as much regard for objective, bonafide, this-really-happened-truth as there is among those who stress propositional revelation. Our choice of story is meant to underscore the personal impact of this God-directed, God-centered reality. The term history may imply facts from the past, details and data impersonally collected and arranged, but this history is not passionless. God's Salvation History was meant to be our family history. Our lives are either wrapped up in this history, or we have no lasting history at all. Thus, to stay in the story is to unite our personal narrative with Salvation History.

For many of us it has taken years to discover that this is where our own personal story begins. We were confused by the chaos, emptiness and darkness over the surface of the deep (Gen 1:1-

2). It wasn't until the Spirit of Christ made us into a new creation that we discovered our roots (2 Cor 5:17) and believed in our eternal destiny. Now we have a fresh perspective of where we've come from and where we're going. As heirs of salvation, purchased of God, born of His Spirit, washed in His blood, this is our story, this is our song! Praising our Savior all the day long! We've been entrusted with a great calling. We are Christ's ambassadors, God's linguists, as though God were making his appeal through us, imploring people on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

O Gracious and Holy Father,
give us wisdom to perceive You,
diligence to seek You, patience to wait for You,
eyes to behold You, a heart to meditate on You,
and a life to proclaim You;
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord
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