



# DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

ROMANS 1

AUGUST 2021

## THE EXCLUSIVE STORY

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Five-year-old Matt came down to breakfast distraught. Hardly touching his cereal and bacon, he seemed preoccupied with some plans he was making. His mom inquired as to what was going on, and Matt began to tell her how he planned to eliminate the monster that lived under his bed with guns and traps. He recounted how, late in the night, he heard the monster moving around and how he barely escaped its vicious claws by sleeping in the very middle of his bed. Matt was in a scary story, and his whole life was being affected. Mom checked and found the family's pet cat sleeping soundly under the bed. Matt had adopted a story to fit the circumstances as he perceived them. It took fear, imagination, speculation, and resolve to find a possible solution. It was the wrong story. It didn't fit reality.

Humanity has a history of misidentifying reality and creating stories that often destroy millions of lives or lead societies down paths of fantasy and deception. The Y2K story had

thousands buying land, building alternative safe places, and preparing for a feared calamity that never came. The controversy over climate change exposes the skepticism prevalent in the stories that supposedly explain the phenomena in weather. Many are still seething over reports of supposed massive voter fraud during the last national election. Some are planning another end-time apocalypse based on prophecies they have heard. Interest in UFOs has recently increased based on papers released by the federal government. Stories abound trying to explain the sounds we hear and the sights we observe. It is very confusing, unless there is an exclusive story that interprets the others and makes sense in the core of our being. There is!

Stories are not just for entertainment. They can be dangerous. It is a dangerous story that misidentifies the source of life, the nature of the problem we face, or the solutions we embrace. The biblical story diagnoses the dangerous and damning story of sin in history.

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Paul in his letter to the church in Rome explained why the gospel (the true story from God's perspective) is needed in every culture on earth (see Romans 1:18-32). People refused to acknowledge God as the source of all things. They lost the ability to distinguish between created things and the Creator. They also lost the ability to properly distinguish between sexes. Their biological drives became perverted, and finally they were unable to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong. A wrong story will always lead to a bad ending for those who believe it.

During the Retold Retreat at Tesoro Escondido in June, we dug deeply into the nature, structure and power of story. Of course we featured the biblical story. Some responded, "I feel like you have taken my Bible away, but I'm excited to open a better one." Sadly, we have been guilty of reading the Bible in bits and pieces rather than as the universal story explaining global reality. In an article by Michael Goheen in *Theology Today* (Volume 64 (2008): 469-483), there is an illustration about a man standing in a crowd and hearing someone say: "The scientific name for the common duck is *histrionicus, histrionicus, histrionicus*." Though the sentence is a complete thought, it doesn't have meaning apart from the context of the story, which is up for speculation. It could be that the

man is following the advice of his psychotherapist who is helping him deal with shyness. "Just say anything in a public place." Or it could be that he thinks he is talking with a friend who asked him earlier if he knew the scientific name of the common duck. Or he could be a foreign spy seeking to find his contact by using an unusual code. Or it could be something else. Without knowing the rest of the story, the sentence can be misinterpreted by each person who heard it. The apostle Peter addressed that:

*First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21 NRSV)*

The Bible tells the story of origins, purpose, problem, solution, climax and ramifications. It is not just a story that is a possible explanation of history. It is The Story. That is why it carries authority. Many cultures have their religious books that give a version of what is going on, but the Bible is the story for all cultures. Goheen mentions a Hindu scholar who asks Christian missionaries why they presented the Bible as a religious book because it is the universal story for all people. In the context of spiritual warfare, we can see why the frontal attack in recent

history has been on the exclusivity of the biblical story. What we call Postmodernism claims that there is no one story. Every story is equally valid and must not be dismissed. Much of our educational system is teaching that everyone must define his or her own story and that it alone is authoritative. Everyone is right. Of course, this explanation does not work, and it is leaving millions groping for meaning beyond their own making.

Globally, there are basically three stories competing with the biblical story that are seeking to capture the minds of people: The Muslim story features Mohammed and his concepts of God. The Marxism story explains reality in terms of oppression, group identity, and revolution. Money is the featured star in the Materialist story. Making a profit to create wealth with which to make life more comfortable and convenient is the plot. Of course all of these narratives lead to seeking power to control and manipulate people, things, and the future. Then there is the biblical story that tells of a loving, sovereign Creator who wanted to have a people on earth to delight in Him as He delights in Himself. Being made with agency, they chose to believe an alternative story from the representative of evil and found alienation, isolation, fear, and shame. This sovereign good God enacts a plan to redeem humanity by exposing their

deception regarding reality and their erroneous belief that they could do something to appease Him or gain His favor. He finally chose to incarnate Himself in the person of Jesus to live up to the requirements of divine fellowship, pay the penalty of broken covenants, defeat the arch enemy of God and goodness, and create a people on earth who are reconciled to God and restored to His original purpose.

There have been many great storytellers in history. Homer was one of them. He told stories that allowed humans to suspend their own reality temporarily to live in his story. However, when the book closed, they were back in their own stories. The story God tells (the gospel) permanently takes the believer into a new reality that supersedes his own. He is then enabled to live in the new story as a vital part of the eternal story. Using a biblical term the believer lives a *repentant* life: changing his mind and his choices to fit the story he now occupies (see Mark 1:14-15).

The gospel story is about God and His initiative to create, redeem, and delight in His people. It starts with: "In the beginning God..." It concludes with His name being glorified in heaven and earth. His name is His character and that character is one of a mercy unimaginable by human reason. When we think of needing salvation, we first think of what we must do to earn it.

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Whatever the answer, it is wrong. When I was a young pastor, I utilized a program written by James Kennedy called Evangelism Explosion. The first question to ask a prospect was: "If you should face God's angel at heaven's gate and were asked, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' What would you answer?" If the answer starts with "I," it is wrong. For example, "I lived well. I prayed a certain prayer. I was baptized. I believed the right doctrine..." The only right answer begins with "God." Our redemption, like our creation, is first an act of God's grace. "Because God loved me and sent his only begotten Son to live and die for me, I am invited into his eternal home."

It is no wonder that the apostle Paul emphasized the biblical story in mentoring Timothy:

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17, NRSV)*

The biblical story instructs us to the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ. It produces proficient and equipped people who do good works because they are doing everything as God's partners to accomplish His mission. We are guided to the salvation offered by God. We are given God's perspective on reality. We are given the boundaries of right and wrong so that we judge by the proper metrics. We are corrected to make choices that are consistent with God's purpose and our fulfillment. We are trained to live out the righteousness that we have been granted in believing in Jesus as Lord.

Every story ends in tragedy (calamity) or comedy (delight). The tragedy is if the story is unread, un-lived, and untold. The comedy is that the story is read, believed, lived, and told to the ends of the earth. It is an exclusive story.



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