

The Story: The Apostle's Creed - 2 Timothy 1: 8-14, Jude 3

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“Three guys went into a bar: a Methodist, an Episcopalian and a Presbyterian.” What kind of story do you expect? Of course, a joke. And probably a mild joke, because the three people mentioned are all very similar. The tension of the story would amp up in today’s world if I said, “Three guys went into a bar, a Presbyterian, a Muslim and an atheist.” Spines stiffen. Faces wince. Are you about to say something offensive? Or suppose I start a story, “We were down by 5; it was fourth and one at the 13 yard line, 7 seconds to go. Baker lined up on the right sideline.” Do you expect me to say, “Baker slipped and fell on his face. The blocking collapsed. The quarterback was sacked and time ran out.” What kind of story would that be? I want a heroic victory story. “Baker leaped 8 feet to catch a desperation pass in the end zone, we won by 2 and Saban cried for two weeks.” That’s a story I want to hear.

We live by internal stories inside us that tell us how things are supposed to go. Have you ever been shocked by the difference between people, say at exam time? One guy buckles down all semester, studies hard, and by sheer effort is pulling a C. He’s poised to pass. But then he skips his exam and goes fishing. Fails the course and fails to graduate. It was all there in front of him, but the internal story told him: you are a failure, you won’t amount to anything. And he doesn’t. By contrast, another guy lives with such a powerful story of life and his success that he fools around all semester. Envious people even say, “Look pal, the jig is up for you. The music is going to stop and you’re going to be left with the bill.” But he pulls an all-nighter, swaggers into his exam and leaves with an A. His internal story says, “The jig is never up! I was made to shine.” I’ve known both those guys. Most of us live somewhere in between.

We also live by big, overarching stories that tell us what to do and where we are going. One of those stories is “Work hard, do the right thing and life will work out for you. You will rise above the pack and become a success.” Another story is “Believe in yourself. Give yourself to fulfill your dreams, and you can be anything you want to be.” Both of those are powerful stories. But not really enough for a life are they? I want to know what success really is. I want to know the point of being who I feel called to be. I want to know how I live when my dreams don’t come true.

The introduction to the movie *Love Actually* gives a one minute overview of a fairly comprehensive story for living. We see a scene of the arrivals area at busy Heathrow airport in London, with people hugging each other as they reunite. Hugh Grant provides the voiceover:

LIVE IN THE STORY

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport. General opinion studies make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed. But I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it is not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there: father and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the twin towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from people on board were messages of hate or revenge; they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I have a sneaking feeling that you will find love actually is all around.

That's not a bad overarching story for life. Love is the point. In the end, it's not what I accumulate, what power level I achieve, what my homes look like, nor even what extreme adventures I have. It's about who I love and who loves me. We're here for relationship. To help each other. To encourage each other to flourish. Not to be alone but to go through the world and life together. I think most people would agree that love actually is the point of life. And our best movies, books, plays and songs speak that story against the competing stories of power, pleasure, wealth or security as the point of life. Scrooge learns to love: we tell that story again and again.

But there are just a couple slight problems with the movie version of life as love story. We all know it but rarely say it. You anticipate the reunion at the airport. You look forward to the car pulling into the driveway. For a moment it is all you hoped as the greetings and embraces unfold. But then the old distance between hearts creeps in. Then the sniping, the ignoring, the correcting, the guilt, the harping, the cutting begins. You want to love but they just drive you crazy. Why do we feel farthest sometimes from those with whom we are closest?

Here's the other problem: endings. The movie stories end with people together into an indefinite future. But we know better. In the best relationships, people live together for 60 years. They know each other so well they hardly need to speak a word. But all too soon they are parted from each other by death. Children grow up. The first closeness is gone forever. Sometimes there is a new closeness, but never the same. Jobs take people to different cities. Friends drift. And through it all, we know that accident, illness or simply time sunders us from the loves we have. How do we account for that?

We need a deeper, broader, bigger story. A story that accounts for the sadness yet doesn't end as a tragedy. C.S. Lewis said of the gospels: there is no story men would rather be true. We have an unsurpassable story. A narrative that holds up in the face of violence, tragedy, accident and cruelty. A narrative that gives purpose to living, power in forgiving, meaning in suffering, and hope of everlasting life. We have the story of stories. And we need to decline the cultural pasting we get that says our story is narrow minded or shallow or cruel. Please. Our story compared to the stories the world tells is like the difference between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. Lake Pontchartrain is broader. At any one spot, it's bigger to look at on the surface. It's much more manageable to swim or sail in. But is there



any comparison between this shallow pond and the mighty Mississippi? Yes, the Mississippi's borders are narrower. But its channels create its depth and power. Lake Pontchartrain has an average depth of a dozen feet. The Mississippi passes by us at 75 to 200 feet deep. Yes, Pontchartrain is wider. But the Mississippi runs from Minnesota to the Gulf. The Christian story has some borders to it, yes, but the depth, the power, the reach are unsurpassed.

Let's look again at our passage. Paul is writing to his young leader Timothy:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. – 2 Timothy 1: 8-10

Paul speaks directly to the personal story unfolding in Timothy's life. Timothy, you are experiencing ridicule for being a Christian in a world that does not know Christ. It seems like you're a fanatic, an idiot, a fringe guy out of step with normal people and that doesn't feel like your story. You always saw yourself going with the flow, doing well and having a good peaceful life. What's more, you see that I am in chains in prison. Suffering can come with being in Christ. Suffering never feels like the point of life. It's not in the script of my story either. But let me tell you a bigger story. I want you not to be ashamed when it feels bad to be thought of as weird for being in Christ. I want you not to fear when you face suffering in the present. Nothing is wrong. Rather, I want you to see your story as including joining me in suffering for the gospel?

Why? Because God gives us his power. He has enfolded us into a far greater, far reaching story than that of personal comfort. Look, God saved us as part of his purpose and grace. It wasn't because we achieved something, or did something to get his attention. No, before you were made God gave you his purpose for his life. Before you came into being, God gave you his grace, his free, forgiving, everlasting love. But he didn't give it to you, Timothy, as an isolated, independent individual. He didn't plan from eternity for you to live for yourself. Your personal story is part of a much greater love, a much higher plan. God gave you his purpose and grace before the world began in Christ. You have a story of everlasting love and life, but it's not located in yourself. It's in Jesus. In Jesus' story. It's like I had ten million Roman denarii for you, Timothy. I could give them to you directly, and put them at risk. Or I could put them in the Bank of Rome, with wise advisors to show you how to use the money. You go to the bank and the money is there. You go to Christ, and the grace and purpose are there.



So here's the deal. You can be at peace about your personal life story as you let it be taken into the life story of Christ Jesus. What's his story? Well, in the fullness of time, he appeared in the world. He is the Son of God coming to be with us. He is God making himself known in all his love, power and forgiveness. What did Jesus do in the world? He abolished death. He brought life and immortality to light. The death that touches every story of love has been defeated. The gap that is between us and God has been closed in Christ. The gap that exists between people can be closed when both find their lives and stories in the deeper story of Jesus. The old loneliness can disappear. Grace and purpose catch us up.

So Paul went on:

So I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. – 2 Timothy 1: 12-13

He's saying, "Timothy, my personal story has been taken up in the great story of Christ Jesus. My story now began with his story, when before time began, God determined to save his creatures who would rebel against him. He has come to us. He has abolished death, forgiven sin and gathered us to himself. In order to send us to the world with this great news. Not everyone wants to hear of a God who made them, loves them, saved them and claimed them. Because they'd rather be miserable than accept that their lives are not their own and they can't make their lives work on their own. That's OK. This story is bigger than all that. My life is not mine. I have been entrusted with the greatest story of all time: to learn it, live it, and share it. God called me to himself. He will guard me. He will keep me until that Day when Christ Jesus returns to set all things right. You live this way, too. Pattern your life after the Big Story of what God has done in Christ Jesus. Locate your life in Christ, so that you can live from his faith and love. Then you can stand any personal discomfort or even suffering in this life. You can take death because it's not the end. You can take pain because healing is coming. You can take scorn because you hear the voice of the only who matters, the one who has accepted you forever in Christ.

We have a gospel to proclaim. It's deeper, richer, and stronger than any story told in the world. People don't always want to hear it because even though God is love, his reality claims us out of living for ourselves, by ourselves, and we don't give up autonomy easily. That matters not. We pattern our lives after a higher, more beautiful story than living for self, for dreams, for revenge, for piles of pleasure. The world changes around those who are in Christ, with his story speaking through them.

That's the heart of the equipment that we find in the Christian toolbox this morning. Our story. The essential narrative of what God is doing. Everything changed for me when I realized that the Apostles'



Creed is not primarily a set of propositions. It's a story. It's the essential narrative of what the Father, Son and Spirit have done in the world, what they are doing and will do. The Creed gives us the hooks on which we can hang our telling of the gospel.

I always enjoy meeting with confirmation students. One of the questions I ask to see if they have done their memory work is, "Which of the memory verses did you like best?" Now it usually takes a minute for them to recall a verse, and usually they pick part of the 23rd Psalm or John 3: 16. But the other day, Gregory Cole said, "I like the Apostle's Creed." Wow. That's great. What is it about the Creed you like so much? "It's the story. It's the whole story of God and Jesus. If someone asks you what the story is, you have it all right there." I wanted to shout, "Goaaaaall!" Yes, yes, yes. You got it. It's our story in concentrated form. It's the hooks of the story—you can tell the gospel by filling in the spaces between the hooks.

I believe in God the Father Almighty. God exists, and he is not just a force. He is personal. He is the Father who loves us and wants to relate to us. In love he made all things in heaven and earth. When we spurned his love, death entered the world and disorder. But God stepped in. He sent Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord to save us. Jesus suffered and died to take away our sins. He rose from the dead to defeat all death and evil. He went back to his Father to prepare a place for his bride the church. One day he will come again and set all things right. Today he sends his Holy Spirit to join others to himself. The Spirit brings us into relationship with Jesus so our sins are forgiven and we receive eternal life. Faith and love and life are all in Christ Jesus. I believe into that story and it becomes my story.

Rich Mullins set the Creed to music several years ago, and he added a commentary about the Creed throughout the song. Rich said, "I did not make this. No it is making me. It is the very truth of God and not the invention of any man." I did not make this. This is not a story I could invent, of a God who came in skin to save his people. No, this story is rewriting my story. This gospel is making me over, every single day.

This week, ask yourself some questions like these: what stories shape my life and expectations in the world? What stories about why I am here and what I do run through me? What does the gospel of Christ have to say about why I am here, what am I called to be and do, and what God has done in the world to make it possible? How do I tell the story of how my personal story got taken up in Christ's great story? Could you write that out in a page? Could you share it with someone?

You see, when we get it about the story that God is telling in the world, and see how he has enfolded us into that story, we're no longer ashamed of the gospel story. We are thrilled by it. A flat, tedious life becomes a life full of wonder. Sorrow yields to hope. Failure is erased by grace. Despair becomes joy. There's no better story anywhere.