

Dear Salem Family,

Thanks for taking the time to read our monthly elder's corner.

Over the past several weeks, I have been co-teaching an Adult Learning Group on the Parables of Jesus (along with my good friend Neil Dyer). It is notable that Jesus chose to teach using parables. At their core, parables are stories. They capture our attention and imagination, and they convey truth in ways that other forms of teaching cannot. The Parables presented in the gospels illustrate life in God's Kingdom. They demand a response from those who hear, challenging us to live life as it ought to be lived. Jesus is a master teacher and a master storyteller.

Whether we realize it or not, our minds and hearts are filled with stories – internal scripts that we use to make sense of our lives and experiences. Unfortunately, the stories that we believe and live out of are often not consistent with Biblical truth. What stories do you hear and heed? How do you believe life works -or- if life is not working out for you, why not? Does life even follow a storyline?

One of my favorite movies of all time is *The Princess Bride*. One reason this movie is effective is that it is presented as a book that a grandfather is reading to his grandson. Initially, the grandson is less than enthusiastic (he would prefer to play video games), but his grandfather attempts to convince him that the book will be exciting and interesting:

The Grandson: *A book?*

Grandpa: *That's right. When I was your age, television was called books. And this is a special book. It was the book my father used to read to me when I was sick, and I used to read it to your father. And today I'm gonna read it to you.*

The Grandson: *Has it got any sports in it?*

Grandpa: *Are you kidding? Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles...*

The Grandson: *Doesn't sound too bad. I'll try to stay awake.*

Grandpa: *Oh, well, thank you very much, very nice of you. Your vote of confidence is overwhelming.*

As the grandfather reads, the story fails to deliver on the grandson's initial expectations. He becomes uncomfortable when two main characters share a romantic moment early in the book.

The Grandson: *[interrupting] Hold it, hold it. What is this? Are you trying to trick me? Where's the sports? Is this a kissing book?*

Grandpa: *Wait, just wait.*

The Grandson: *Well, when does it get good?*

Since I don't want to spoil the movie, I won't discuss the details of how the story unfolds. The grandson is gradually drawn into the story. As it captures his imagination, he begins to care about the characters and to become invested in what happens to them. At one point, he is upset when the story does not seem to be turning out the way that he wants it to and exclaims: "*What did you read me this thing for?*"

The objections that the grandson raises as the grandpa reads the story should sound familiar to us. They are rooted in two core issues: **genre** and **authorship**.

Genre has to do with the nature of the story being told – what sort of story is it? Is it comedy, tragedy, romance, action, thriller, etc.? When things happened that were different from the genre that he expected, the grandson was disappointed. This was not the sort of story that he signed up to hear.

Authorship has to do with who is writing the story and the degree to which we are willing to accept the way that the plot of the story is unfolding. Are the things happening in the story what we want to happen? Are they what we would choose if we were the one writing the story?

Just like the grandson, we often find ourselves disappointed and upset when the story of our life is not progressing the way we want it to. We may reach incorrect conclusions about the genre of our story. We may stop trusting God, the author, to bring our story to a satisfying conclusion.

The truth that we learn about our stories comes from understanding how our individual stories fit into the larger Biblical story as it makes its way from Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” to its ending in Revelation 22:20-21: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.”

It is a story that weaves its way from Creation to Fall, to Redemption, and finally to Restoration. We are still in the middle of both this grand story and our individual stories, and we await their culmination. Some chapters bring suffering, pain, and deep sorrow. However, we must hold on to hope. We must remember that our story has not yet reached its ending, no matter how bleak things sometimes look, as we are reminded in this quote from the Lord of the Rings:

“It's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad has happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines, it'll shine out the clearer. I know now folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.” — Samwise Gamgee

We need to remember that, at its core, the overarching genre of both the story of the Bible and our own personal stories is, at its very core, a love story. It is the story of a God who loved us enough to die to save us and who longs for us to be restored to fellowship with Him and with one another. We need to remember that the Author of our stories can be trusted and that things will turn out right. Above all else, we need to keep reading and heeding the true story so that we are not lured into believing and living out of other untrue stories. As we are told in the final lines of the movie *The Princess Bride*:

The Grandson: *Grandpa. Maybe you could come over and read it again to me tomorrow.*

Grandpa: *As you wish.*

Finally, as we continue to read and heed the grand story behind all our individual stories, we must answer the call to become storytellers ourselves. God wants us to share our stories with those around us to help them understand their lives in light of God's unfolding story.

Here are a few updates and items to be in prayer about:

- Please join us in praising God for the Vision that was unveiled last Sunday (April 14th) and continue praying for us as we continue to work on living out this Vision together.
- Please pray for our upcoming church business meeting on Sunday, May 5th

Your brother in Christ,

Justin James