

Stories: Part 1

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[0:00] Do you be seated. One of the real joys of having Ruben and Andrew and of them being such good preachers is it gives me a little bit more freedom, a little bit more space to think.

And what I want to do tonight and this morning and tonight and the next two Sunday nights is to really take a theme which we don't often do.

And so I want to preach to you on stories. We live in a world of stories. Stories are both powerful for good and for bad, aren't they?

So some stories are really heartwarming. You know certain films you go to. They warm your heart. They bring you joy. They're life-giving. They change our mood.

They bring enormous comfort. They stir memories. Certain stories are inspirational. They stir us to do better. Might be books that you can think of as I think of that.

[1:10] Some stories are powerful for bad. I expect you've had this experience like I've had. You're watching a TV show and you get caught up in the story. And you get moved in a way that's counter to your own conscience or morality or the things that you believe.

You find yourself hoping for something to happen in the story which you'd never want to happen in real life. So you've watched those romantic films. There's a gorgeous woman. She's so pretty and attractive.

And she's married to a very simple, dull, ordinary guy. He's non-communicative. He doesn't take an interest in her. And then a Brad Pitt type figure appears in the office.

You know that? He's gorgeous. He's kind. He's generous. He takes an interest in her. He captures her attention. And isn't it true that as we're watching we almost will the affair to happen?

And we want them to get together. And we think they should have got together in the first place. It's the power of a story. It's a double-edged sword.

[2:18] And our culture is full of stories and storytellers. Harry Potter. Lord of the Rings. The Chronicles of Narnia.

The Gruffalo. The Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Authors like Julia Donaldson. P.D. James. Agatha Christie. We live in a world of storytellers.

This week I've been away with old friends. Friends who I've known for decades. And when you're together with friends that you've known for decades. What do you do?

As you sit around. You tell stories, don't you? You tell the same old stories. Over and over again. And you don't get bored of them.

Maybe you go out and something happens. There's a standoff on the bus. Or there's an accident. And when you come back home. You tell the people about it. And they say, give me the story.

[3:21] You're watching a TV programme. And a news reporter breaks in and says, we have a breaking news story. When someone is new and you meet them.

You say to them, tell me your story. The writer Daniel Taylor has written, our stories tell us who we are. Why we're here. And what we are to do.

Our stories give the best answers to life's big questions. And to most of the small ones too. We all have a story. But we live in a world, and particularly in this city, where people have lost their stories. Life can feel like you've arrived 45 minutes late to a film. Do you know what that's like? You sit down in the cinema or at home to watch a film, but you're 45 minutes late.

And you know there's something going on, but you can't work out what. And life is like that. It's like good things happen. Beautiful things happen. But tragic things too. Sad and painful things.

[4:34] Your life and my life can seem like an endless routine. Same old, same old. But life can also feel totally random, can't it? And we find

ourselves in the middle of a story that's sometimes wonderful and sometimes awful.

And often it's a confusing mix of both. And we don't know how to make sense of it all. It's like finding fragments of a book and trying to read it.

It's like trying to get a few pages but not having the whole volume. And as I begin to think about this, we see that there's a shape to our stories. In fact, there's a man called Christopher Booker.

Christopher Booker is not a Christian. He wouldn't profess to be a Christian. He spent 35 years researching stories. And in his book, he tells us that there are seven different types of stories. All the stories in the world could be characterized by seven plots. I'm going to go through them. And we at some point will get to the Bible.

[5:37] All right? I promise you. But actually, I think what we find by this guy Christopher Booker, even though he's not a Christian, is he shows us something about our world. So the first plot that he shows us is this, overcoming the monster.

That's the first plot, if you put it up there. Overcoming the monster. That is, defeating a force that threatens. So if you think of films, James Bond, overcoming the monster.

Defeating a force that threatens. Lots of Hollywood films are about this. Star Wars. If you're into Star Wars, it's about this. But in the Bible also, we see this overcoming the monster, defeating the threat.

So think of David and Goliath. Goliath is a great threat. And the boy David defeats him. Goliath is the force that needs to be overcome. Somebody needs to be the hero. Think of Moses and the Red Sea.

And Moses and the children of Israel, they're at the Red Sea. And the Egyptians are behind them. The Red Sea's in front of them. And there's climax and there's build-up. Defeating, overcoming the monster.

[6:41] Secondly, there's the quest. So think of the film, Indiana Jones. Or the book, Pilgrim's Progress. It's about a quest, isn't it? Think of the wise men at Jesus' birth.

I think of the 12 spies in numbers. Think, in fact, of the Exodus journey. It's got a start point and it's got an end point. Number three, think of the voyage and return.

So the obvious one is Lord of the Rings, isn't it? Or back to the future. They go back to the past and then into the future. They've gone somewhere and then they've returned.

Something has changed. So in the Bible, think of Naaman. Or think of Naomi and Ruth. She goes out full, doesn't she? She leaves Israel full, but she comes back bitter.

Think of the 12 disciples that Jesus sends out and they're casting out demons. But they find that they can't do some things. There is this voyage and return.

[7:43] Plot number four, the comedy. It's not kind of ha-ha, but it's a misunderstanding that keeps people apart.

And then they're brought back together. Think of those endless watchings of Pride and Prejudice that people do. Think of Notting Hill.

Long-suffering films. In the Bible, think of Balaam's donkey. He goes up a mountain to curse and it doesn't work. And then he goes up another mountain and he's trying to curse God's people, but he can't.

Think of the tragedy, number six. Number five. Hamlet. It starts well. It ends very badly.

In the Bible, you've got the character of Saul. He starts very well. He ends very badly. Think of Samson. Starts well. Ends badly. Think of the Book of Judges as a whole.

[8:41] It's a tragedy. Think of rebirth narratives, number six. Snow White. Die hard. They end much better than they started.

Think of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in the Bible. Where Isaac is taken up a mountain and things end up much better, don't they? In the start. And number seven. Think of rags to riches.

Rocky. Willy Wonka. And the chocolate factory. Ruth. The story of her in the Bible. She's a Moabitess. She's a nobody. She's a widow. And as she ends up in the people of God.

Think of David, the shepherd boy. He rises to fame and he becomes king. Think of the demoniac in Mark chapter five. He's a hopeless case. He's bound by chains.

He's naked. And yet he meets Jesus. And he is reborn. It's a rags to riches story. And so what I think this guy teaches us, this Christopher Booker, is that when you go to the Bible, you see all these kind of stories, these seven stories.

[9:47] And yet, when you come to the scriptures, there is a magnificent coherence about them. The Bible is one big story.

It is one big story. It starts in a garden and it ends in a city. It is the story of a hero. Someone who comes and kills the dragon and gets the girl.

He kills the dragon. He defeats Satan. And he gets the bride of Christ. And the internal integrity of the Bible and all the little stories that we find in it fit in with the one big story of God's plan.

It is one of the great arguments for the truthfulness of the Bible. It's written over thousands of years by so many authors to so many different contexts, so many different languages, different cultures. And the internal integrity of the Bible is astounding. There's no religious writing like it. I don't know if you've ever read the Koran. The Koran is not coherent.

[10:53] There's no one big story. The Koran can't hold a candle to the Bible. Muhammad arrives in 650 AD. And if you've ever read the Koran, there's no coherence to it at all.

The closest thing to one big story is the story of Joseph, which Muhammad got from the Bible. And even that he gets wrong. And so I want to focus in these four sermons on the big story of the Bible. Now, children, we did this at Sunday school, but how do fairy stories begin? Anybody? How do fairy stories begin?

Juan. Once upon a time. Once upon a time. And then what happens in a fairy story? Once upon a time, it's all calm, it's all good. And then what happens in the story?

Simeon. Simeon. It goes bad. An enemy comes, doesn't it? And something goes wrong. And then what's the next part of the story about?

[11:59] Florence. A rescuer comes, doesn't he? A dragon slayer. Or somebody comes to rescue the princess in the tower. A rescuer comes.

And then how does fairy stories finish? How do they always end? Yes. Brilliant. Happily ever after. And what I think we see there is we see something of, that was fairy stories telling, echoing a greater story. A greater story.

Because right at the beginning, do you remember? Not once upon a time, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

It's not never, never land, it's in the beginning. It's a perfect scene, Genesis 1 and 2. So beautiful. And then in Genesis 3, do you remember, there's a fall.

[12:58] I think fall is, have you ever seen an old person fall? It's a horrible, horrible thing, isn't it? They trip over a paving stone. It's a horrible thing to watch someone fall.

And we should feel that. An enemy comes and the fall happens. It goes wrong. And then we have the long story of the rescuer, don't we? The dragon slayer, the serpent crusher.

Jesus Christ who comes to rescue his bride. Who kills the dragon and gets the girl. And the end of the story is what? Happily ever after.

We could put it into four questions, couldn't we? We could say, how did I get here? What's gone wrong? How am I rescued? Where am I going?

I wonder, you might be new to church today. I wonder what your answer is to those four questions. How did I get here? What's gone wrong? Because something has gone wrong. How am I rescued? And where am I going?

[13:58] And I want in four sermons to take these four stages so that you and I can find our place in the story. And I want you to feel the echo that all those little stories tell of the greatest story.

There's one verse that summarized what I want to say this morning. It's Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 11. Let me read it to you. Where it says, First point.

Before the beginning, God. Before the beginning, God. How does the Bible start?

It starts, In the beginning, God. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The very first words in the Bible, In the beginning, God.

But there's an echo of those words later on in the Bible in John's Gospel. Where it says, In the beginning, was the Word. And the Word was with God.

[15:20] And the Word was God. He, the Word, was with God in the beginning. And through him, all things were made. And without him, nothing was made that has been made.

When you take those two verses together, what they show us is that when you go back to the beginning, there is something before the beginning. The writers of the Bible peer back into eternity. Into the mysteries of God and his life. Before anything and anyone else existed. In the beginning, God.

Before the dawn of time, there was something immortal. Someone eternal. I wonder how you think of God. When somebody says the word God, what's the first thing that comes into your mind? Some kind of force? Some benevolent, white-bearded man on a throne? We often think of God alone in eternity.

[16:33] but God was not lonely in eternity. God has always been in fellowship.

The Christian God is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One God in three persons.

The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father to the Son. He is the eternal love which flows between the Father and the Son as they delight in each other.

There is one God, and he exists in three persons. And what this means for us is this, that the whole story, the great story, begins in something relational.

One God in three persons. This earth and this world has all the marks of a master's hand. The world is relational.

[17:42] You are relational. So think with me for a moment. What are your greatest joys in life? What are your greatest joys in life? It's your family, isn't it?

Or it's your friendship that you have with people. Or it's falling in love. And what are your deepest wounds?

What are the times when you've been hurt the most? Well, it will be, won't it? Some breakdown or a failure in a relationship. That's what hurts the most.

That you were loved, but you're no longer loved. Or that you've never been chosen. And so one of the deepest longings that human beings have is to belong, isn't it?

To be part of things. To be invited in. Because we want to be part of a fellowship. Where did that come from?

[18:46] We are relational accord. Why else would we come up with solitary confinement as a punishment? We are made, it says in Genesis, in the image of God.

He says, let us make man in our image. You were made, and I was made, to know and to be known. To love and to be loved.

The longings that you experience for this reality are because God has put them there. The world that we live in is not a lonely universe.

But it is one born out of love. And it's wise that the self-centered life doesn't work. The world is rigged in such a way that life does not work when you make it all about you.

If you put yourself at the centre of your life, it will not work. If you put your work at the centre of your life, it will not work.

[19:52] If you put your family at the centre of your life, it will not work. If you put your marriage at the centre of your life, it will not work. Why? Why? Because God has put eternity in your heart.

There is a personal God who cares personally for his people. So firstly, before the beginning was God.

Secondly, in the beginning, God made man and woman. Let me read to you from Genesis chapter 1. Why don't you turn there?

Genesis chapter 1 is right at the start of the Bible. Verses 26 and 27. And it says this. Then God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness.

Do you remember God is one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And let them, human beings, have dominion over the fish, of the sea, of the birds, of the heavens, over the

livestock and over all the earth.

[21:01] And over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them.

So this story begins, doesn't it? Human beings are made in the image of God. There is a clear distinction in how human beings are made from the rest of creation.

Let me speak to you dog owners. You love your dog. Your dog, you think, is lovely. All right? And your dog is precious to you.

Great. But your dog is not made in the image of God. Your animals are valuable. And we should care for them.

They are God's creation. But they are not the same. Your dog is on a completely different level. Because you and I are made in the image of God.

[22:07] Let me read you Psalm 8, how the poet puts it. He says this, what is man that you are mindful of him? The son of man that you care for him. You've made him a little lower than the heavenly beings.

And crowned him with glory and honor. You've given him dominion over the work of your hands. You've put all things under his feet. All sheep and oxen and the beasts of the field. And dogs too. The birds of the heaven and the fish of the sea.

Whatever passes along the paths of the sea. Adam and Eve were made in the image of God.

Crowned with glory and honor. And they were made like God in the way that he was.

And what he did. And they were made like God in his being. And in his doing. What this means is this. There is not a human being.

That you and I will ever meet. Who has not been made in the image of God. And there's not a person living in this city. Who has not been made in the image of God.

[23:10] And no matter how fallen. No matter how broken. No matter how unbelieving. Each and every one of us has God's image stamped upon us.

The sceptical. Agnostic. The hardened. Atheist. Whether they like it or not. Have been made by God.

And in the image of God. That's you. People might deny it. They might suppress it. But they cannot erase it. What do we do with this knowledge.

That we've been made in the image of God. Well Romans chapter 1. Tells us that humanity tries to push it down. They try to deny it. And Paul says. For what can be known about God is plain to them. Because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes. Namely his eternal power. That God made this whole world. That can be clearly seen. And his divine nature. That there is a God.

[24:10] They've been clearly perceived. Ever since the creation of the world. In the things that have been made. So that human beings are without excuse. For although they knew God.

They did not honour him as God. Nor did they give thanks to him. But they became futile. Foolish in their thinking. And their foolish hearts were darkened. But they know in their hearts.

Listen to what Paul says. Again. For although they knew God. The knowledge he's speaking there.

It's not saving knowledge. It's not the knowledge. That leads you to become a Christian.

But humanity. Every human being through creation. And through their conscience. Knows that there is a divine being. There is a God. And they can't escape it.

It's like when you go to the swimming pool. And you get a beach ball. And you try to put the beach ball under the water. Do you remember? And you press it down. And you sit in it. And what happens? As soon as you let it go.

[25:09] The beach ball flies back up into the air. In the words of Ecclesiastes. God has put eternity in their hearts. And the fact that men and women.

And boys and girls. Are made in the image of God. Should give to us massive encouragement. The people who you pray for. As a church. And the people who you are seeking to.

Speak to about the Lord Jesus Christ. They know that there's a God. And when you tell them. The good news about the Lord Jesus. That there is a God. Who has lovingly sent his son.

Into this world for them. There is something in them. That chimes with that message. And it's that. Which often produces. The antagonism. And the antipathy to it. And so we must go after.

People's consciences. Preachers must go after. People's consciences. That we recognize. That the people that we're speaking to. Have an intrinsic worth. But more than that.

[26:07] They are not only made in the image of God. But they know that within them. There is a recognition that there is a God. No one. No one lives.

As if we are. Bags of random DNA. Let's say a child runs into the road. And is knocked over by a car. No one comes in and says.

Oh there's some random DNA. Lying on the road outside. No one does that. Do they? They recognize there is something. In that little child.

Truth and reality are on our side. I've told you this before. But in the story of Peter Pan. We are told that every time. Someone says they don't believe in fairies.

What happens? What happens? Every time someone says they don't believe in fairies. What happens in Peter Pan? A fairy dies.

[27:07] So boys in school playgrounds. Have terrorized girls. And they by shouting. I don't believe in fairies. But with God. The fact that people. Don't believe that he exists. Has no bearing on the reality.

Of his existence. His existence. God doesn't go away. Just because. You say you don't believe in him. In fact. The very breath.

That you use to say. That you don't believe in God. Has actually been given to you by God. And in a strange paradoxical way. The very capacity.

That people have to formulate the statement. Declares his greatness. And his glory. Even as you say. I don't believe in God. You're declaring his praises. Because.

You are fearfully. And wonderfully made by him. You may be talking. Talking total rubbish. But the very fact. You're able to talk at all. Is. To his praise and glory.

[28:08] So to say. I don't believe in God. Doesn't make him go away. It's like the little child. Isn't it? That you know. Little children. When you play hide and seek. And little children.

They think. Because they've got their hands. Over their face. That you can't see them. The little child. Thinks you've gone away. That's silly isn't it? But you can't treat God.

In the same way. Try it with the police. And next time. You're driving along. The car. And the police pull you over. And you see the blue light. You pull over to the hard shoulder. And you wind down the window.

And as the. Traffic policeman. Comes to you. You say. Well. Actually. I don't believe in policeman. I don't believe in policeman. There's a lovely. Humorous story.

About Khrushchev. And the communist leader. The Soviet leader. And the Chinese communists. Hated Khrushchev. The Russian. Prime Minister.

[29:02] And they called Khrushchev. A bible quoting clown. And he didn't mind. Being called a clown. But he didn't like. Being called a bible quoting clown. So.

Khrushchev calls a press conference. And at the press conference. He announced to the world's press. I want to assure you. I am an atheist. I am an atheist. An English journalist said.

You do talk a lot about the almighty. For an atheist sir. To which he replied. Do I have to tell you twice. I am the chairman of the council. Of Soviet ministers. Of the Soviet Union. And I am an atheist.

A French journalist. Piped up and said. How do we know. That you are not a secret believer.

Khrushchev exploded. Into the microphone. Will you listen to me.

God knows. I am an atheist. As a church. Today. We must not lose. Our confidence. In what God has told us.

[29:56] About humanity. North. Is north. Regardless of whether. People like it or not. And they might protest it. They might deny it. But north is still north.

Isn't it? And holding to this truth. That people are made. In God's image. And have a sense. Of the reality of God. Doesn't change. No matter how much. People present. Act 17.

In him we live. And move. And have our being. So finding our place. In this story. Is recognizing. That God has put eternity. Into our hearts. Augustine expressed it best.

Didn't he? He said. You have made us for thyself. And our hearts are restless. Until they find. Their rest in me. You were made. For something greater.

You were made. For something better. Before the beginning. God. In the beginning. God made man. Now let me try to play this. Can you see the coherence.

[30:56] Of the Christian story. Can you see. How the Bible's message. Makes sense. Of the world. In which you live. Of how it makes sense. Of you.

And your longings. How it makes sense. Of your stories. The personal God. Father. Son. And Holy Spirit. Has made you.

So that you can know him. And enjoy him. And glorify him. The relational God. This relational God. Is the God of our salvation.

Jesus said. In John 17. Verse 24. He prays. And he says this. He says. Father. I desire. That they also. Whom you have given me. May be with me.

Where I am. To see my glory. That you have given me. Because you loved me. Before the foundation. Of the world. Becoming a Christian.

[31:54] And living as a Christian. Is being brought. Into a relationship. Into union. And communion. With this God.

The coming into this world. The life. And the death. And the resurrection. Of Jesus Christ. Were all part of God's. Great plan.

To bring. Salvation. And rescue. To men and women. Boys and girls. Like me. And like you. Who are made in his image. It's why when people say that.

Christians and Muslims. Believe in the same God. We cannot. And we will not. And we must not agree to it. Because the Christian God. Is one God.

In three persons. Father. Son. And Holy Spirit. This story. Makes sense. Of every other story. And we need to. Learn to read. The stories.

[32:48] That we tell. The stories of the world. In the light. Of this great story. Psalm 36. Verse 9. In your light. We see light. The coherence. Coherence.

Of God's story. Secondly. It means this. That every life. Is precious. If every human being. Has been made. In the image of God.

Every life. Is precious. And so those. With additional needs. Those with disabilities. Are made. In the image of God. And as a church. We must be a place. That welcomes. And cares. And values. All who are made. In the image of God. The church.

Of Jesus Christ. Has always been a place. Where the vulnerable. Are cared for. And we must love. Those who are not lovable. It's why. Abortion.

[33:43] Is such a terrible thing. It is the taking. Of a life. That God has given. It's why we must pray. That assisted suicide. Cannot become law. Because it is. God alone.

Who gives life. And God who ends life. It is why. As Christians. More than any other time. We must speak up. For life. It means that life.

Is precious. But more than that. It means that your life. Is precious. It means that you matter. You are not a machine.

You are not a cog in a wheel. You are not random DNA. You may have been treated terribly. You may be broken hearted.

You might feel terribly alone. But this. Is a message. That tells you. That you have been made. In the image of God. And you are precious. And this is a personal universe.

[34:43] And the God who made you. Can be known. Through his son. Jesus Christ. And so stop suppressing the truth. Stop trying to keep the beach ball.

Below the water. Recognize the reality. Of the world in which you live. Go where this world. Is pointing you. And where your conscience. Is pointing you. God has made you.

For himself. And your heart. Is going to be restless. Until it finds its rest. In him. And thirdly and lastly.

Let me tell you. Of a God who can be known. This is a spoiler really. For the rest of the series. But when we talk about being made. In the image of God. As we read our Bibles.

We cannot but think of him. Who is the image. Of the invisible God. The Lord Jesus Christ. I read to you earlier. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God.

[35:44] And the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And all things were made through him. And without him. Not anything was made. That was made. And in him was life. And the life was the light of men.

And the light. Shines in the darkness. But the darkness has not overcome it. And then just a few verses later. We're told that this word. Became flesh. He entered into humanity.

The Lord Jesus came to undo. What we have done. He came as part of God's great plan. To rescue and to save. To bring us back.

The creator. Entered into creation. The author. Entered into the story. And why did he do that? He came to remake.

To renew. And to rescue. He came to seek. And to save. That which was lost. And that is how you enter into the story.

[36:51] You recognize this morning. You're lost. And you don't know the way home. And you don't know the way back to the God who made you.

And yet you don't have to. Because God has come. In the person of his son. The Lord Jesus Christ. To seek and to save. The lost. You can call on him now. You can ask him to save you.

You can ask him to rescue you. You can come tomorrow night. To Christendon to explore. Do you maybe got lots of questions? Come and explore this greatest of all stories.

We would love to welcome you. You can come with questions. Or you can come and sit and listen. We'd love you to be there. But go where your conscience is telling you to go. Stop suppressing the truth.

And realize that in the beginning. Before the beginning was God. And in the beginning God made you. And he made you to know him. And to enjoy him. Let's pray.