

The Happy Ending – Will It Happen to Me Too?

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Introduction: What Story Do You Live In?

This morning I want to ask you, 'What story do you live in?' All of us live in a story. We have a storyline running through our heads. And we play a major role in it. Let me give you some examples.

Do you live in the hero story? This is a story where someone who makes a difference in the world and makes a name for himself or herself. You start off with some kind of hidden talent. You face obstacles, adversity, mountains and valleys of hard work, only to overcome in the end. What matters is the quest, the challenge, and the victory. It is the story of Harry Potter, the unlikely hero who is given a burden that no one else could carry, who fulfills his destiny. It is the story of King Leonidas, who gives his life against King Xerxes and the Persian Empire. Here's a clip from 300 on that. [clip from Scene 17, where Xerxes is calling Leonidas to submit to him.] Notice how the threat of Xerxes is to wipe out Leonidas' story. But as we know, the story is being retold by Dilios, who finishes his story on a new battlefield. As he finishes his story of the 300, he says, 'Here they stare now, across the plain, at 10,000 Spartans, commanding 30,000 free Greeks,' who are now united behind Sparta. Did you know that that story was retold in World War II. In the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill called for British soldiers. He said the British were the 300 at Thermopylae, because the massive Nazi army had conquered Europe and was now coming for them. Every British schoolboy knew that hero story, and it gave them courage to stand against the Nazis. That is the power of the hero story: the superhero who beats the villain, the scientist who finds the cure in time, the criminal investigator who uncovers the truth and protects the innocent, the trial lawyer who persuades the jury and brings justice. Is that the story you live in?

Or do you live in the princess story? Is your story the story of someone who wants to be discovered, to be seen? You are a Cinderella, sweeping and scrubbing floors surrounded by people who don't fully appreciate you, who don't recognize your potential and your quality. You are waiting for someone to see who you really are. In the Asian-American community, the movie *The Joy Luck Club* exemplifies this type of story. Here's a clip of a daughter who has always wanted her mother to 'see' her. The setting is a dinner table where two childhood friends, June and Waverly, along with their parents, are having a shocking argument. Waverly's firm had hired June to do a design job, but unfortunately Waverly and her firm thought June's work wasn't good enough. [clip from 1:52.47 – 1:55.22] The scene resolves when June's mom says that she sees June being more generous than Waverly, even at the dinner table by taking the smallest piece of crab. She sees that June has a 'best quality heart.' When someone sees you, your life is more complete. Is that the story you live in?

Or do you live in the family struggle story? *The Joy Luck Club* is an example of this type of story, too. So are *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *The Godfather* trilogy, Chinese movies like *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, and *The Incredibles*. That's the story of a rags-to-riches family that goes through lots of silent suffering and family dissonance. Parents and children both want different things. And the family goes through misunderstandings and tears and conflict and sacrifice. But in the end, this family achieves not only success but family harmony. Children understand their parents. Parents understand their children. Love and appreciation blossom like a desert flower after a long drought. And then happy grandchildren are born. Is that the story you live in?

We are story-telling creatures. And these are good stories, aren't they? Regardless of what story we live in, we tend to want a happy ending. The question for tonight is, as we advertised, 'Will it happen to me, too?'

But Why Do We Expect a Happy Ending At All?

Most stories in most cultures in most times did not believe in a happy ending. If you could talk to those people, they would ask you, 'Why would you think there is a happy ending for you?' There's either a tragic ending or a circular non-ending, like in many Asian stories. Just look out at the world. The sun rises, and then sets. The seasons come, and then go. People are born, and then they die. The thing that repeats is family. So that's why family became all-important. You keep trying to break through the

circularity through your children, and your children's children. For a while, I believed that family was the most important thing in life. But I had to change my mind. In college, I talked with a friend of mine who is Asian-American, raised in the American Deep South, in Mississippi. His family had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, working hard at a store, dealing with the subtle pressures of being a different race than everyone else around them. My friend had even made it to Stanford and wanted to make it big. But every time he thought about why he was doing this, no answer was good enough. He had met some students in his program who were spoiled and had an ugly attitude of entitlement. My friend then realized that his kids would probably turn out the same way. Then he felt stupid giving his future kids a prestigious position in society and having them take it for granted and become spoiled rich kids. His conclusion: It's meaningless. There is something deeper we are looking for and hoping for. Our purpose may involve family, but family is not our reason for being. The Chinese classic called *The Dream of Red Mansions* says as much. It's a story about family struggle that just keeps going around in circles, in cycles. All the family's hopes of regaining their honor rests on one boy, Pao-Yu, who can do it if he passes his government exams. All the family politics, the alliances, the betrayals, the affairs, happen around him. And then he fails. Tragic ending, or a circular non-ending. That is the way of the real world.

Some movies, when made for a European audience, have a tragic ending, like *Fatal Attraction*. It's not exclusively American, but it seems particularly American to have a 'happily ever after.' Why is that? What is it about American culture that has this expectation? I'll return to that question after a bit.

For now, I want to briefly explore the history of the happy ending. Where did it come from? The happy ending comes from one place: Judaism. The Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament was the first literature to expect a happy ending. Everyone else – Homer's Iliad from Greece, the Atrahasis Epic from Babylon, the Avesta story from Persia – were all circular. Hinduism and Buddhism are circular. If you could plot the story visually, it would be a circle. The Greek tragedies were based on this plot arc. You're born, you die. Empires are born, and they also die. Everything goes back to where it came from. The way things were – the way things are – the way things will always be. Life is circular.

The Pattern of the Messianic Story

Israel was different. The Jewish people alone had a linear perception of life. There are two reasons for this. First, they experienced their God as someone who made a promise, and then fulfilled it. That gave rise to a linear sense of history. You could mark things in time. All times are not the same. God makes things different. Second, they believed that their God was good, and that He would ultimately triumph over evil. Good and evil were not equal entities or equal principles in the world. Therefore, they would not keep going around each other, cycling through forever in a yin and yang kind of pattern. No. God would actually triumph over evil one day. And that period of history that all Jews hoped for, longed for, was called the Messianic period. It was the happy ending. Jewish monotheism, belief in one good God, created the idea of the happy ending. You can read Thomas Cahill's book *The Gifts of the Jews* if you want to a very readable book on this.

You can think of this story of God as a play with five Acts. Act One was the beginning of humanity, where God created humanity in a Garden land. But from the beginning, humanity allowed sin and evil into the world, and they were exiled from the Garden land. Act Two began with God's selection of Israel. They were a microcosm of humanity, and they knew that God was doing something with them that would one day affect all humanity. God brought Israel into a new Garden land. But Israel also allowed sin and evil in, and they were exiled from their Garden Land. Act Three was Jesus. And in this Act, God Himself, the author, enters His own story. He 'created' one human being, one member of humanity, in whom He would dwell, that would undo the sin and evil of Israel and all humanity.

If we could take a zoom lens camera and zoom in to watch Jesus very carefully, here's what we would see. We would see the classic suffering hero archetype unfolding in real history. Jesus filled it to the full. It was like Frodo struggling constantly with the Ring of Power, except that the evil was *inside* Jesus because he was wearing it. Why? Jesus took onto himself the flawed humanity that we all have. He wore it. So the same physical body that we have, that craves physical comfort and sexual satisfaction, Jesus had. The same mouth that we have, that gossips about others, sneers at others, and puts others down, Jesus had. The same fists that we have, that threaten others, that strike others, Jesus had. The same mind that we have, that

always tries to think secretive, private and self-centered thoughts, Jesus had. But Jesus constantly redirected his own humanity back into the love of God. At every point, he resisted the temptation to love himself first above all others, a posture we know very well. At every point, he resisted the will to power. He realigned his own squirming humanity into his unshakable commitment to God.

I've often wondered what that was like for him. We have very little idea what it means to resist the evil and self-centeredness within ourselves, because we give into that self-centeredness fairly early on. Like smelling your favorite food but not eating it, the more you resist it, the harder it gets; the longer you resist it, the more fiercely it rages. The closer the Ring got to Mordor, the stronger it became. We don't know the power of evil, because we give into it fairly early on. Jesus resisted, and he faced demons we will probably never meet.

And when he went all the way to his death on the cross, he exhausted the self-centeredness and evil of the humanity he took on. When you watched *The Passion of the Christ* and saw all the brutal torture thrown at Jesus on his way to the cross, that torture was there to persuade him not to go, to quit. That's why he would get up so quickly afterwards. It wasn't that he wanted more torture. It was that he would not be stopped by these obstacles being thrown at him. It's like how Sauron's Ring of Power had to fall into the fire to be destroyed, or how the pieces of Voldemort's soul had to be destroyed: Jesus brought his self-centered humanity into a collision with the other-centeredness of God, where it was crushed. That titanic struggle happened inside Jesus, in his very body. Paul in his letter to the Romans said, 'God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus.' (Rom.8:3) So when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he came back in a new kind of humanity, a perfected humanity, one that is totally in line with the holy love of God. Jesus perfected his humanity, so he could connect himself with us, so that our broken humanity might be made into a humanity that is being made whole and good, but only in vital spiritual connection with him.

Thus began Act Four, the Act in which we now live. The old Jewish prophecies said that 'out of Zion would come a message of salvation.' Zion would be the epicenter of a renewal that would ripple across the whole world. God's happy ending was another step closer to its fulfillment. Jesus sent his people into the whole world to proclaim a message that they were joined with him spiritually, and that anyone who wanted to be joined to him could be, by believing in him.

So to back up, the Messianic story was a story of two basic elements: (1) a suffering hero who has (2) a global impact. From Jesus to the rest of humanity. From Jerusalem to the rest of the world. I want you to keep those two basic elements in mind, because we are now going to see what happened to that story.

The Rise of Secular Stories

In the West, something very strange happened. Uniquely in the West, the Jesus story was parodied. The Jesus story spread in all directions, but only the West perverted the story. Essentially, Western Christians made themselves the new epicenter: not Jerusalem, but Europe. And then, when the West started to reject Jesus himself, Western philosophers wanted to hold on to the happy ending, but without Jesus. After all, who wants to go back to a circular story? That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. If I repeated that enough times, it would drive you crazy, and that's what they didn't want to admit. They didn't want to go back there. So they kept a linear story.

How many of you are philosophy majors? Do you study Enlightenment philosophy? The interesting thing about Enlightenment philosophy is that it isn't just philosophy. It's story telling. Hegel told a story about conflicting ideas that merged with each other and culminated in his philosophy, which would spread to the whole world. Adam Smith told a story of how capitalism can and will produce wealth for all nations, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Marx told a story of revolution and socialism, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Social Darwinism told the story of European civilization becoming more and more complex, like life apparently, over time. So it became the 'white man's burden' to 'civilize' the rest of the world. Freud and Nietzsche told the story of people in Europe realizing that God is dead, an idea which would then spread over the rest of the world, a world that was only primitive and superstitious. We protest those stories today, we argue with them, and yet we still live in them. I'll show you how.

But let me point out to you that the two basic elements, (1) a suffering hero who has (2) a global impact starting from Jerusalem, were distorted. The same plot arc was kept, but the details were changed. Instead of going from Jesus in Jerusalem to the rest of the world, you now went from the white man in Europe to the rest of the world.

Evidence of Circularity Again Today

The poet T.S. Eliot wrestled with that. In 1922, after the devastation of World War I, people started to realize that the story that Europe told wasn't true. The story of European civilization bringing the world to a better place was shown to be a false story. So T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote *The Wasteland*, which many believe to be the greatest poem produced during the 20th century. Listen to the destruction that the poem describes, Europe and the world lie in shambles:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.
In this decayed hole among the mountains

Not only is it filled with imagery of despair, but *The Wasteland* is not a story. It's a poem, a circular poem. That is key. One of the things Eliot understood was that the story told by Western philosophers is not true. It wasn't a story about Europe bringing the world into glory. It was a story about injustice. It suppressed other people's stories, like the Native American story.

Let's think about American culture for a little bit. I asked earlier why is the happy ending so much of American culture? There is an American story, and it is a parody of the Jesus story. 'We are bringing democracy and progress to the world.' That's a Messianic story, minus Jesus and minus Jerusalem. Just substitute in 'the United States.' **The story is that there is a form of salvation that has been worked out, not in the physical body of Jesus, but in the social system of the United States, and now it's going to spread over the whole world.** This is why we are often completely surprised when the facts tell us that we're wrong. What about the environment? Did you know that, at this rate, by the time we are grandparents, we will not have any polar icecaps? What will that be like? What about the growing gap between rich and poor? What about the Native American story? What about the Black American story? What about urban poverty and violence? What about how quickly are we using up resources and blowing up people?

Notice how movies are more critical of U.S. involvement in World War II: Clint Eastwood portrays the Japanese as fully human in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, whereas typically you'd demonize your enemy and make them inhuman. In his other recent movie, *Flags of our Fathers*, he discusses how dehumanizing war is even when soldiers are back at home. Another movie, *The Good German*, with George Clooney, takes place after World War II. A 'good' German scientist wanted to tell the truth about what the Nazis did. But the U.S. wanted to protect another German scientist who would give them atomic secrets. So a U.S. agent killed the good German. Years ago, no one would have criticized U.S. involvement in World War II or explored our national self-interest in the War. World War II was the War where the U.S. was unquestionably good. Yet now, we are not at all certain about that.

Does the story of the West, or even the story of America, have a happy ending? Will it happen to you? I doubt it. The West is filled with exhausted wells and exhausted stories. And we know it.

Personal Stories of Circularity

We DON'T live anymore in a larger story where good triumphs over evil. We might have personal stories, or family stories. But no larger stories. So many of us, as we search for a happy ending, a linear story, will just narrow down the scope to our family or ourselves. 'Let's just have a linear career path. I'll just keep getting more powerful, more rich, and more happy.' Really? How many of you have seen the movie *Office Space*? I worked for Intel Corporation in California and it was like Office Space. I graduated in

1994 from Stanford, and got a job at Intel during the high-tech boom when Intel stock was doubling every 18 months. You would think people were really excited about what they were doing in Silicon Valley in the 90's. But you'd be surprised. I worked in an internal management consulting group. We consulted all the major chip design projects, so the Pentium II, III, and IV – I worked on all those computer chips. It was so repetitive. Every week I had to collect the same data from the same database. I had to run the same analysis. I had to go to the same meetings and present the same basic information week after week. It was pretty boring. If you think you'll find ultimate meaning in work alone, I think you're fooling yourself. How do I know that? Because I majored in Industrial Engineering. I was trained professionally to make organizations efficient and independent of any one individual. That means that there are a lot of people with my training who deliberately organize your job as a routine, so that if you leave, someone else can take your place pretty easily. Really: You will become replaceable. Even if you're the CEO of something, you'll wonder, 'Why do I have this grueling travel schedule just fundraising and lobbying for my organization?' Well, it's because you can't be entrusted with too much, because even a CEO has to be replaceable. Circularity again.

Coming Back to the Jesus Story

The happy ending – will it happen to you? That is the question here, and in a few minutes I'm going to give you an opportunity to choose. You would probably like it to. So would I. I think it's impossible to have a happy ending to your story without Jesus. Whether I think about it personally or more broadly, the story of Jesus is the best story I know. On all kinds of levels and for all kinds of reasons. With Jesus, God has taken one more step to the happy ending. He is the hero, so the hero story is filled to the full with him. And yet he calls us alongside him to share in it. He is the one who needs to be seen for who he is, and he also sees us for who we are. He is the one who restores the family of God, and we, as we are brought in, and called to invite others as well. But most importantly, I am simply drawn to Jesus as a person. He has changed my life and my story, and I've found that it is far better to be a minor character in his story than to be the star in my own.

If we had more time I would have loved to tell you more about that, but we're here so *you* could reflect. How do you feel about your story? Maybe you feel like there is no direction to your story. Maybe you feel like your story is arbitrary. Maybe you feel alone in your story. Maybe you feel like there is no hope in your story, just no happy ending to really hope for. And maybe, just maybe, you are getting a sense of who Jesus is. Maybe you're getting a chance to see that Jesus wants you to enter into his story, to be a part of his story, to journey with him, and to spread his goodness among humanity which is what God wanted for all time. Do you want to finally be on God's side in this story?

Conclusion

I invite you to step into the Jesus story. What other story could you live in that is more real and more awesome?