

EPIC



THE STORY
GOD IS TELLING
and the ROLE THAT IS
YOURS TO PLAY

JOHN ELDREDGE



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*I had always felt life first as a story—
and if there is a story there is a story teller.*

—G. K. CHESTERTON

PROLOGUE

“I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?”

— J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*

 It's been quite a journey for Frodo and Sam when the little gardener wonders this. Ever since they left home they've encountered more wonders and more dangers than they could have possibly imagined. The battle on Weathertop. The flight to the ford. The beauty of Rivendell. The dark mines of Moria, where they lost their beloved Gandalf. Their fellowship has fallen apart; their friends are now far away on another part of the journey. Into the shadow of Mordor they've come, two little hobbits and their cooking gear on a journey to save the world.

It's at this point Sam says, “I wonder what sort of

tale we've fallen into?" Sam could not have asked a better question.

He assumes that there *is* a story; there is something larger going on. He also assumes that they have somehow tumbled into it, been swept up into it.

What sort of tale have I fallen into? is a question that would help us all a great deal if we wondered it for ourselves.

It just might be the most important question we ever ask.

LIFE IS A STORY

Life, you'll notice, is a story.

Life doesn't come to us like a math problem. It comes to us the way that a story does, scene by scene. You wake up. What will happen next? You don't get to know—you have to enter in, take the journey as it comes. The sun might be shining. There might be a tornado outside. Your friends might call and invite you to go sailing. You might lose your job.

Life unfolds like a drama. Doesn't it? Each day has a beginning and an end. There are all sorts of characters, all sorts of settings. A year goes by like a chapter from a novel. Sometimes it seems like a tragedy. Sometimes like a comedy. Most of it feels like a soap

opera. Whatever happens, it's a story through and through.

"All of life is a story," Madeleine L'Engle reminds us.

This is helpful to know. When it comes to figuring out this life you're living, you'd do well to know the rest of the story.

You come home one night to find that your car has been totaled. Now, all you know is that you loaned it for a couple of hours to a friend or your teenage daughter, and now here it is, all smashed up. Isn't the first thing out of your mouth, "What *happened?*"

In other words, "Tell me the story."

Somebody has some explaining to do, and that can be done only in hearing the tale *they* have to tell. Careful now—you might jump to the wrong conclusion. Doesn't it make a difference to know that she wasn't speeding, that in fact the other car ran a red light? It changes the way you feel about the whole thing. Thank God, she's all right.

Truth be told, you need to know the rest of the story if you want to understand just about anything in life. Jokes are like that. There's nothing to them at all if you walk in on the punch line. "Then she said, 'That's not my dog!'" Everyone else is in stitches. What is so dang funny? I think I missed something.

Love affairs, layoffs, the collapse of empires, your

child's day at school—none of it makes sense without a story.

STORY IS HOW WE FIGURE THINGS OUT

Bring two people together, and they will soon be telling stories. A child on her grandmother's lap. Two men in a fishing boat. Strangers stuck another hour in an airport. Simply run into a friend. What do you want to know? "How was your weekend?" "Fine" is not a good answer. It's just not satisfying. You heard something about a mariachi band, a fifth of tequila, and a cat. And you want to know more about *that* story.

Look at our fixation with the news. Every morning and every evening, in every part of the globe, billions of people read a paper or tune in to the news. Why? Because we humans have this craving for meaning—for the rest of the story. We need to know what's going on.

Our boys are ambushed somewhere in Asia. What's happening over there? A virus is rampaging on the Internet. What do we need to do to protect ourselves? Somehow we don't feel as lost if we know what's going on around us. We want to feel oriented

to our world. When we turn on the news, we are tuning in to a world of stories. Not just facts—stories.

Story is the language of the heart.

After all, what's the world's favorite way to spend a Friday night? With a story—a book, a favorite show, a movie. Isn't it true? Good grief! There's a video store on every corner now. They've taken the place of neighborhood churches.

It goes far deeper than entertainment, by the way. Stories nourish us. They provide a kind of food that the soul craves. "Stories are equipment for living," says Hollywood screenwriting teacher Robert McKee. He believes that we go to the movies because we hope to find in someone else's story something that will help us understand our own. We go "to live in a fictional reality that illuminates our daily reality."

Stories shed light on our lives.

We might know that life is a journey, but through Frodo's eyes, we see what that journey will require. We might know that courage is a virtue, but having watched Maximus in *Gladiator* or Jo March in *Little Women*, we find ourselves longing to be courageous. We learn all of our most important lessons through story, and story deepens all of our most important lessons.

As Daniel Taylor has written, "Our stories tell us who we are, why we are here, and what we are to do.

They give us our best answers to all of life's big questions, and to most of the small ones as well."

This is why, if you want to get to know someone, you need to know *their* story. Their life is a story. It, too, has a past and a future. It, too, unfolds in a series of scenes over the course of time. Why is Grandfather so silent? Why does he drink too much? Well, let me tell you. There was a terrible battle in World War II, in the South Pacific, on an island called Okinawa. Tens of thousands of American men died or were wounded there; some of them were your grandfather's best friends. He was there, too, and saw things he has never been able to forget.

"But in order to make you understand," explained novelist Virginia Woolf, "to give you my life, I must tell you a story."

I expect all of us, at one time or another, in an attempt to understand our lives or discover what we ought to do, have gone to someone else with our stories. This is not merely the province of psychotherapists and priests, but of any good friend. "Tell me what happened. Tell me your story, and I'll try to help you make some sense of it."

You seem . . . stuck. Things fall apart. What does it all mean? Should you have chosen a different major after all? Were you meant to take that teaching

job? Are you going to find someone to spend your life with, and will he or she remain true? What about the kids—are they headed in the right direction? Did you miss an opportunity in their lives, some key moment along the way? And if crucial moments are about to happen, will you recognize them? Will you miss your cues?

We humans share these lingering questions: “Who am I really? Why am I here? Where will I find life? What does God want of me?” The answers to these questions seem to come only when we know the rest of the story.

As Neo said in *The Matrix Reloaded*, “I just wish I knew what I am supposed to do.” If life is a story, what is the plot? What is your role to play? It would be good to know that, wouldn’t it? What is this all about?

“Seeing our lives as stories is more than a powerful metaphor,” wrote Taylor. “It is how experience presents itself to us.”

WE HAVE LOST OUR STORY

And here’s where we run into a problem.

For most of us, life feels like a movie we’ve arrived at forty-five minutes late.

Something important seems to be going on . . . maybe. I mean, good things do happen, sometimes beautiful things. You meet someone, fall in love. You find that work that is yours alone to fulfill. But tragic things happen too. You fall out of love, or perhaps the other person falls out of love with you. Work begins to feel like a punishment. Everything starts to feel like an endless routine.

If there is meaning to this life, then why do our days seem so *random*? What is this drama we've been dropped into the middle of? If there is a God, what sort of story is he telling here? At some point we begin to wonder if Macbeth wasn't right after all: Is life a tale "told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"?

No wonder we keep losing heart.

We find ourselves in the middle of a story that is sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful, often a confusing mixture of both, and we haven't a clue how to make sense of it all. It's like we're holding in our hands some pages torn out of a book. These pages are the days of our lives. Fragments of a story. They seem important, or at least we long to know they are, but what does it all mean? If only we could find the book that contains the rest of the story.

Chesterton had it right when he said, "With every

step of our lives we enter into the middle of some story which we are certain to misunderstand.”

The world has lost its story. How that happened is quite a story as well, one we haven't time for here. But the latest chapter of that story had to do with the modern era and how mankind looked to science to solve the riddle of our lives. As Neil Postman said about the scientific view:

In the end, science does not provide the answers most of us require. Its story of our origins and our end is, to say the least, unsatisfactory. To the question, “How did it all begin?”, science answers, “Probably by an accident.” To the question, “How will it all end?”, science answers, “Probably by an accident.” And to many people, the accidental life is not worth living. (*Science and the Story That We Need*)

Since then we've pretty much given up on trying to find any larger story in which to live. We've settled for *uncertainty*—we can't really know. Listen to the way people offer their thoughts or opinions on just about anything these days. They always start or finish a sentence with a qualifying comment like this: “But that's just the way I see it.”

That's not merely a show of humility. It's a sign of our shared belief that nothing certain can be known. All we have now are our opinions. "The lost sense," poet David Whyte observed, "that we play out our lives as part of a greater story."

It was one of those great stories
That you can't put down at night
The hero knew what he had to do
And he wasn't afraid to fight
The villain goes to jail
And the hero goes free
I wish it were that simple for me.
(Phil Collins and David Crosby, "Hero")

What sort of tale *have* we fallen into?

THERE IS A LARGER STORY

Walk into any large mall, museum, amusement park, university, or hospital, and you will typically meet at once a very large map with the famous red star and the encouraging words *You are here*. These maps are offered to visitors as ways to orient themselves to their situation, get some perspective on things. This is the Big Picture. This is where you are in that picture.

Hopefully you now know where to go. You have your bearings.

Oh, that we had something like this for our lives.

“This is the Story in which you have found yourself. Here is how it got started. Here is where it went wrong. Here is what will happen next. Now this—this is the role you’ve been given. If you want to fulfill your destiny, this is what you must do. These are your cues. And here is how things are going to turn out in the end.”

We can.

We can discover *the* Story. Maybe not with perfect clarity, maybe not in the detail that you would like, but in greater clarity than most of us now have, and that would be worth the price of admission. I mean, to have some clarity would be gold right now. Wouldn’t it?

Start with the movies you love.

I’m serious. Think about your favorite movies. Notice that every good story has the same ingredients. Love. Adventure. Danger. Heroism. Romance. Sacrifice. The Battle of Good and Evil. Unlikely heroes. Insurmountable odds. And a little fellowship that in hope beyond hope pulls through in the end.

Am I right? Think again about your favorite movies. *Sense and Sensibility*. *Don Juan DeMarco*. *Titanic*. *The Sound of Music*. *Sleepless in Seattle*. *Gone with the Wind*. *Braveheart*. *Gladiator*. *Rocky*. *Top Gun*. *Apollo 13*. *The*

Matrix. The Lord of the Rings. The films you love are telling you something very important, something essential about your *heart*.

Most of us haven't stopped to ask ourselves, *Now why that heart? Why those longings and desires?* Might we have been given our longings for love and adventure, for romance and sacrifice as a kind of clue, a treasure map to the meaning of Life itself?

Next, I want you to notice that all the great stories pretty much follow the same story line. Things were once good, then something awful happened, and now a great battle must be fought or a journey taken. At just the right moment (which feels like the last possible moment), a hero comes and sets things right, and life is found again.

It's true of every fairy tale, every myth, every Western, every epic—just about every story you can think of, one way or another. *Braveheart, Titanic,* the *Star Wars* series, *Gladiator, The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. They pretty much all follow the same story line.

Have you ever wondered why?

Every story, great and small, shares the same essential structure because every story we tell borrows its power from a Larger Story, a Story woven into the fabric of our being—what pioneer psychologist Carl Jung

tried to explain as archetype, or what his more recent popularizer Joseph Campbell called myth.

All of these stories borrow from *the* Story. From Reality. We hear echoes of it through our lives. Some secret written on our hearts. A great battle to fight, and someone to fight for us. An adventure, something that requires everything we have, something to be shared with those we love and need.

There is a Story that we just can't seem to escape. There *is* a Story written on the human heart.

As Ecclesiastes has it,

He has planted eternity in the human heart.

(3:11 NLT)

Look, wouldn't it make sense that if we ever *did* find the secret to our lives, the secret to the universe, it would come to us first as a story? Story is the very nature of reality. Like the missing parts of a novel, it would explain these pages we are holding, the chapters of our lives.

Second, it would speak to our hearts' deepest desires. If nature makes nothing in vain, then why the human heart? Why those universal longings and desires? The secret simply couldn't be true unless it contained the best parts of the stories that you love.

Yet it would also need to go deeper and higher than any of them alone.

EPIC

Christianity claims to do that for us.

Not the Christianity of proper church attendance and good manners. Not the Christianity of holier-than-thou self-righteousness and dogmatism. Not another religion, thank God.

That is not Christianity. Oh, I know it's what most people, including the majority of Christians, think Christianity is all about. They are wrong. There is more. *A lot more*. And that more is what most of us have been longing for most of our lives.

A Story. An Epic.

Something hidden in the ancient past.

Something dangerous now unfolding.

Something waiting in the future for us to discover.

Some crucial role for us to play.

Christianity, in its true form, tells us that there is an Author and that he is good, the essence of all that is good and beautiful and true, for he is the source of all these things. It tells us that he has set our hearts' longings within us, for he has made us to live in an Epic. It warns that the truth is always in danger of

being twisted and corrupted and stolen from us because there is a Villain in the Story who hates our hearts and wants to destroy us. It calls us up into a Story that is truer and deeper than any other, and assures us that there we will find the meaning of our lives.

What if?

What if all the great stories that have ever moved you, brought you joy or tears—what if they are telling you something about the *true* Story into which you were born, the Epic into which you have been cast?

We won't begin to understand our lives, or what this so-called gospel is that Christianity speaks of, until we understand the Story in which we have found ourselves. For when you were born, you were born into an Epic that has already been under way for quite some time. It is a Story of beauty and intimacy and adventure, a Story of danger and loss and heroism and betrayal.

It is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle where often it is hard

to be sure who belongs to which side because appearances are endlessly deceptive. Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name . . . That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still. (Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*)

But I rush ahead. Let's discover the Epic for ourselves.