

Finding your Story in God's Story (part two)

By Jay Wegter

I. Why are temporal and eternal Values locked in Combat?

Introduction: *What does it mean to find our story in God's story? That is our theme in part two of this series.* As we saw in session one, if our story is to bring honor to God, we must know what God's story is all about. And, only when the message of God's story fills our consciousness, we will live differently. But, in order for God's Word to *dominate exceptionally* in our lives, it will require the very deliberate, intentional exercise of an internal faculty which Scripture refers to as the *eyes of our heart*: "I pray that the *eyes of your heart* may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints . . ." (Eph 1:18).

The reason why our spiritual eyes need enlightening is because we are naturally spiritually dull. We tend not to be animated by things above—by things above the horizon of this temporal existence—even though we are commanded to do so (Col 3:1ff.). It has been said that, 'a swine has never seen a star'. That is not because of poor eyesight, but due to the fact that pigs are not made to be enthusiastic spectators of excellence! The true believer has been enabled by the Spirit's regeneration and indwelling to comprehend the remarkable things freely given to us in Christ (1 Cor 2:12-13). A genuine Christian has both a sight and savor for the things above.

Those who belong to Christ walk by faith in God's Word, and do not walk by mere sense and sight. Jesus described the former as building on rock, and the latter as building upon sand (Mt 7:24-27). The spiritual realities (eternal values) set forth in God's infallible Word are to be 'pressed down' upon our mind, will, conscience, and affections. Only then will the truths of Scripture 'dominate exceptionally' so that we will make the sacrifices necessary to have a story that results in a God-honoring harvest (Mt 13:3-8; 1 Cor 3:1-15; Gal 6:8-9).

Scripture, in many of its narratives, records this tension between eternal and temporal values. One of the most compelling is found in the book of Haggai chapter one.

- 2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'This people says, "The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt." ' "
- 3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,
- 4 "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?"
- 5 Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways!
- 6 "You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is not enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is not enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes."
- 7 Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Consider your ways!
- 8 "Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified," says the Lord."

II. Why did the Israelites procrastinate in obeying God?

Notice that the children of Israel made excuses for postponing their work on the temple. The time for building was never quite right. I have met many professed believers who tell me that they will be interested in spiritual fellowship and ministry once their career takes off; or when they are debt free, or have sold their businesses, or are retired. But, like the Israelites of Haggai's day, they found ample time to work on their own homes. Their behavior revealed a preference for investing in temporal things while ignoring the eternal.

The Lord reprimands the Israelites for this myopic mindset and commands them to reflect upon their behavior with a view to repentance. For them to repent would be to immediately appropriate the resources necessary to resume work on the post-exilic temple. In order to make such a radical change in values, the Word of God must hold sway in one's affections. And that is exactly what happened among the Israelites under the ministry of the prophet, Haggai.

In this matter we see a timeless principle found throughout Scripture—the Word of God believed and loved gives the spiritual sight needed to take action:

- 4 'But now take courage, Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD, 'take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage,' declares the LORD, 'and work; for I am with you,' declares the LORD of hosts.
- 5 'As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!'
- 6 "For thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land.
- 7 'I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD of hosts.
- 8 'The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,' declares the LORD of hosts.
- 9 'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the LORD of hosts" (Haggai 2:4-9).
- 14 "And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia" (Ezra 6:14).

'Spiritual sight' is needed in order for us to be engaged in the Lord's work. The children of Israel were working on a physical temple or sanctuary, but we who live in the gospel age are 'people builders'—laboring with Christ on an eternal temple made of 'living stones' (Eph 2:17-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10).

III. What has to happen for eternal Values to replace temporal Values?

The rebuilding of the temple was a success story. But, what we need to mark down as the pivot point in this story is that the Word of God began *dominating exceptionally* among the

leaders of Jerusalem. The Word *doing its work* enabled them to take action in rebuilding the temple of the Lord. The Word of God ‘installed’ eternal values, so to speak which resulted in them being proactive (1 Thess 2:13). A pastor friend of mine describes this ‘fork in the road’ of obedience versus passivity in this manner: “Are you being transformed by God’s truth, evidenced by your obedience, or are you merely ‘auditing’ the truth?”

This story of obedience in rebuilding the temple recorded in Ezra and Haggai will be read on judgment day. And that story will include all of the names of those who fulfilled their role in rebuilding. My friends, your story will also be read publicly on the last day. Your story will reveal whether your values were temporal, or eternal. Your story will bring to light your *species of faith*, of what kind it is—a *living faith* or a *dead faith* (Jas 2:14-26).

A living faith is animated by the love of Christ according to 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor 5:14-15). And, what is fascinating about this *living faith* is that it requires the execution of our old man, our death to self by co-crucifixion in order for us to live as new people, as new creations.

God has given us a powerful illustration from nature of newness of life by death; the metamorphosis of a butterfly. As a lumpy caterpillar, a butterfly larva has no aerodynamic features. It has no anatomical structures that would allow it to ride the wind going from flower to flower sipping nectar. In order for it to change into a butterfly, it must undergo a kind of death. In assuming the form of a brown cocoon, or chrysalis, it hangs from the underside of a twig, and for all the world, it appears dead, entombed, motionless, and lifeless.

But, a marvelous change is occurring. And, what is remarkable, is that there is only one individual life involved here—one individual, but two radically different lifestyles. Now, the difference between a born-again person and an unregenerate person is greater than the difference between a caterpillar and a butterfly! When God saves a person, the death of Christ is applied to that person (we saw that in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15). The point I don’t want you to miss is that only when a death (Christ’s death) is applied to the old man (who you were in Adam), can the new man emerge and begin to assert himself (Col 3:5-17ff.). Like that earth-bound caterpillar, there must be a radical change before newness of life emerges.

IV. How can I live out a God-approved Story connected to God’s Story?

God’s story is that He is making men and women new in Christ. He is forming a new humanity around His Son (Col 2:10). And, in the process, by His grace and power, and for His glory, He is writing countless stories in, and through the obedient lives of His people. Romans chapter twelve tells us in no uncertain terms what a ‘God-approved’ personal story looks like. “Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship*. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2).

Romans 12:1 -- “By the mercies of God. . .” The word here for *mercy* means compassionate pity addressing our misery. We can only know the hold of sin on us by diligently studying the cost, the gravity of sin’s cure. How expensive, how grave, how drastic a measure was necessary to free us? And now, having received this sovereign mercy, we are to *revolt against the Adamic revolt* as our lifestyle, as central to our Christian walk. For, it is an incredibly serious thing to carry around the remnants of a sin nature, a root of evil that can burst forth in acts of truancy if given the chance. This passage is cancelling out any prospect of passivity in our Christian walk.

Our obedient response to the exhortation in verse one is to spring forth from overflowing gratitude to God. This means that our ethical actions are to be God-ward, theocentric as opposed to seeking to earn God’s favor or obligate God (C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, A Shorter Commentary*, p. 292). To *present* ourselves is the daily offering of one’s whole life back to God. This is polar opposite of merely giving God one’s ‘religious self’ on Sunday mornings. Giving one’s life to God as a surrendered sacrifice means that you understand that you belong to God, and not to yourself (1 Cor 6:19-21) (note, the ‘body’ and its members refers to that set, or complex of faculties which carries out, and expresses that which resides in the mind and heart).

Presenting ourselves back to God in daily surrender is well-pleasing to God. This does not mean that this call to be a *living sacrifice* is over and above what is required of us—the presentation of ourselves to God in surrender is proper, and desired by God of every believer. He will accept our ‘living sacrifice’. This is so important to true worship which keeps faith and life, and belief and practice joined. True worship involves repeated self-surrender as our daily orientation—this must accompany our corporate, or formal worship.

Which is your ‘rational’ reasonable, service of worship. “Rational” means that this service of worship (found in repeated surrendered sacrifice) is consistent with a proper understanding of the truth of the gospel. One’s whole self is involved: personal thoughts, feelings, aspirations, but also words, deeds of the body, and obedience of life. We must understand that the gospel demands this (Ibid, pp. 294-296). Aren’t we beginning to see that this repeated whole-life surrender is essential in order for our lives to compose a story that is pleasing to God? Do you see the divine logic here? The matchless grace and mercy you have received through Christ your Savior makes unconditional surrender to Him, rational and reasonable.

Romans 12:2 – Now the motivation to give yourself back to God daily, unreservedly is a function of faith in God’s truth. After Isaiah was smitten with the sight of God, the sight of his own sin, and then, the marvel of being cleansed, he pleads with God, “Here I am, send me!” (Is 6:8). But, there is a dangerous detour to the consecration enjoined here. For, nothing is easier than to allow the world, this ‘age’ to shape us and press us into its mold. In verse two, the Apostle admonishes us, “Stop allowing yourselves to be conformed to this world/age, and continue rather to let yourselves be transformed” (Grk. -- present, passive, imperative).

Conformity or transformation are both byproducts of something. Conformity to the world takes place when we become lazy at practicing biblical discernment, and consequently when we dial back our resistance to the predominant lies of our age. Conformity to this age creeps silently like a cancer, gradually invading our faculties and affections when we do not daily practice mortification of sin (Rom 8:12-13). (Note what a corrective this passage is to the

‘hyper-grace’ movement today which offers a kind of gospel that does not obligate us).

In Romans 12:2, God is stating in no uncertain terms, ‘stop allowing yourself to be ‘stamped’ afresh by the values and desires of this age’. Though the pressure to conform to this age is strong and insidious, you are not helpless victims of tyranny. Christ’s work provides you with a plethora of resources for victory. The Lord’s redeeming action in your lives provides the power to resist the world (2 Pet 1:3-4). The church is called to be courageous and militant, and not complacent (1 Thess 5:5-24).

V. How can I apply Biblical Discernment to my Story to rid it of all Lies.?

Part of our need for daily discernment is to welcome being examined by the Word of God (Heb 4:12-13). This is part of renewing your mind. ‘Faulty data’ must be replaced with transforming truth. We must confess just how much we are conformed to this age, and repent of it. We must yield to a different ‘spirit’ than the spirit of this age, we must yield to the Holy Spirit—He is so willing to accompany and energize our activity of renewing our minds by the Word of God. Mind renewal is the solution to the constant pressure to be conformed to this age.

Romans 12:2 ends with a result clause—the outcome of dedicated mind renewal is a life of surrender to the Lord. And, God promises that this life of presentation, of daily surrendered sacrifice, will result in doing His will which is *good, acceptable (well-pleasing), and perfect*. But notice that little word, ‘prove’. It is the word for proving something by testing! *The Lord is actually stating that those who live daily surrendered to Him will prove by testing that it is good, pleasing, and perfect to live according to the will of God.* If we spent more time concerned about doing God’s revealed will in His Word, no doubt we would be operating in this ‘sweet spot’ of proving what the will of God is according to Romans 12:2.

My friends, the will of God is not what the rich young ruler imagined it to be (Mk 10:17-24). It is not something manageable and achievable which can coexist alongside of the values of this age. No, the will of God is the absolute demand of God by which He claims us wholly for Himself. Only those being transformed truly recognize this—and as a result they gladly embrace this principle of whole-life presentation, demonstrating their commitment to the Lord in all of the concrete circumstances of their lives (Ibid, pp. 296-298). Daily presentation of ourselves to God results in a ‘unified’ Christian experience, also known as universal obedience.

We ought to be able to discern, and expose the seductive nature of the prevalent lies of this age, so that we might repent of them, lest we be conformed to them. It is easy to identify overt worldliness: we think of substance abuse, sexual immorality, theft, greed, rage, etcetera, but, the lies of our age are often more understated and subtle. One of those lies, promulgated by psychology is that it is your right to pronounce yourself ‘OK’, and anything that makes one feel ‘not OK’ is injurious to one’s self-esteem, and should be avoided. My friends, that is tragic, because that lie will keep you from biblical self-examination (Ps 139:23-24).

A second very clever lie is that there is such a thing as ‘master-less’ freedom. That is the lie that ultimate freedom resides in having no master and in serving no one. Dear ones, that lie was birthed in the heart of Lucifer himself. For, both people and angels were created by God to serve their Maker and find their highest joy and purpose in worshipping, serving, and enjoying

Him. Our young people, especially the rising generation (and the generation that preceded it) are particularly vulnerable to this lie. Practically every Hollywood movie champions this lie of master-less freedom. Scripture makes it clear; we either serve the Lord or sin (Rom 6:11-13; Gal 5:13ff.). I was sharing the gospel with my neighbor, a man around 20 years old. About 15 minutes into the conversation he began to justify himself by saying, “I just sort of do my own thing.” As if to say, “What possible harm, or sin could that be?” He never gave it a thought of the righteousness he owed God as a creature made in the image of his Creator.

The original lie in the Garden of Eden was an invitation to master-less freedom, an opportunity to forget God, live with one’s back to Him, and then to ‘do your own thing’ in the interest of liberty. The world, also called ‘this age’ is absolutely filled the lies about master-less freedom. But, that autonomy lie, namely that it is beneficial to live according to what one feels is best, has many versions, and all of them will take a person to hell. But why is that so? The answer is because the autonomy lie is defiance of God, it is a rejection of who we are and who He is, and consequently, it derails our created purpose. This truth which exposes the autonomy lie is incomprehensible to most millennials because the media has so fully propagandized them with the guile that autonomy equals freedom (and, if there were a divine being to be obeyed, we should have a god who is democratically elected, and who exists to enforce our rights!).

The autonomy lie is traceable to the lie in Eden. Our Lord describes this lie as ‘the love of darkness, and the hatred of the light’ (Jn 3:19-21). It is this lie that makes our fallen race children of wrath who walk according to the powers of darkness (Eph 2:1-2). Now, rather than the sons and daughters of Adam regarding this lie to be some horrific alien parasite fastened to their souls, this autonomy lie is a veritable temple of self-worship—the ‘holy of holies’ if you will of self-love. Every natural man or woman on the planet exercises an unbending loyalty to self. Therefore, this lie will not be relinquished or extinguished except by the regenerating work of God’s Spirit (Titus 3:1-7).

In the interest of holiness, we ought to identify where versions of the autonomy lie are still active in your life and thinking. So subtle is the serpent and his lie, that undetected versions of this lie can block your obedience to Romans 12:1-2. Let’s think through some of these prevarications together:

1) We think of God’s grace as all freedom with little or no obligation. That version of the lie was troubling Titus’ congregation, for Paul writes the corrective in Titus chapter two: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:11-14).

2) We don’t really believe that daily surrender to the Lord will make us joyful. Like the unfaithful steward in the Parable of the Talents, we think hoarding the abilities given to us will ensure against loss rather than diligently investing them in the cause of Christ. In actuality, in the parable of the talents, hoarding did not prevent loss, but ensured loss—Mt 25:13-30). God owns everything, what we have is on loan and we will give an account of what was entrusted to us. To whom much is given, much will be required (Lu 12:48).

VI. Have I realistically faced what is Necessary for a fruitful Harvest?

God-approved stories are about fruit-bearing (Jn 15:8). The key to this usefulness is daily presenting yourself to God in surrendered sacrifice. There is much realism needed at this point. Ministering to others involves risking. Our efforts may not be appreciated, or reciprocated. In order to bring to harvest, we will face setbacks, toil, delays, disappointments, conflict, and some hardship (1 Cor 15:58). The need for endurance, courage, stamina, and perseverance presupposes that God's servant will face many obstacles. But, we must keep in mind that what we have 'grown' will be the result of what we have planted.

The 'rule of the harvest' is that we shall reap far longer than we have planted, and we shall reap far more than we have planted. This principle is inviolable, whether we have planted (figuratively) wheat or thorns—we will harvest what we have planted. Our God-honoring choices will serve us, and our self-serving choices we will have to serve.

Brethren, this issue of serving God is a massive dividing line, a kind of watershed or continental divide; for it says in Malachi chapter three: "Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who esteem His name. 'They will be Mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'on the day that I prepare *My* own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.' So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him" (Mal 3:16-18).

In Matthew chapter 13:3-8, Jesus speaks of the challenges and barriers which stand in the way of successfully bringing to harvest. No one has ever brought about a God-honoring harvest by remaining in their comfort zone. Contrary to the 'seeker-sensitive church model', our commitment to serve God is grounded in His calling of us in Christ, and not upon our comfort.

How we need encouragement and realism at this point. This is why Scripture enjoins the need for great endurance and determination from us—bringing to harvest is hard work (see Acts 14:21-22; 1 Cor 15:57-58; Gal 6:6-10).

Brethren, your story will be examined and read publicly on the last day (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 3:11-15). Your story will be an object lesson to the watching universe—to people and to angels—an object lesson of what you planted, and whether or not the 'good seed' of the Word of God *dominated exceptionally* in your life so as to renew your mind and transform you.

Here is the point: when we are deliberate and intentional about renewing our minds by God's truth, our life story becomes increasingly aligned to, and calibrated by God's story.

Then, we will be willing to make the sacrifices necessary for a fruitful harvest. Professed believers will not take up the cross daily for something vague and remote. The spiritual realities which engender endurance must make their mark upon your affections—even upon your imagination. (EX. Speaking of using our imagination and mind's eye, it is more common today for the fantasizing powers of mind to be engaged thinking about money, fame, The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, vampires, or the latest video game, rather than the coming Kingdom of God.).

God has a story, and your story must be aligned to His if it is going glorify Him. You have a story, it is being written, it will be read publicly. This is reality. Living out eternal values requires spiritual sight. Everything is disputed territory—your relationships, your body, your

thoughts, affections, words, deeds—there is only one way to claim all of that territory for your God—present it all back to Him daily as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2). If you do so, you will have a fervent love for other believers, and you will build them up—and in so doing you will build with Christ and bear much fruit (Jn 15:8).

The remainder of Romans chapter 12 reveals that as we repeatedly present ourselves to God, we ‘find ourselves’—that is we discover how God intends to uniquely use us to bless others. By giving ourselves, we find our place of service in the body of Christ. Do you remember the miracle of the multiplication of the widow’s oil? There was no flow of oil until she began to pour oil into other vessels (2 Ki 4:1-7). So also, the believer’s fruitfulness involves seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. We discover in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12 that God has called us to be ‘people-builders’. A true believer will never say, “I don’t need a story, I am content to sit on the sidelines.” Not so, to be an heir of salvation is to have made God’s cause as your cause—and His cause is His own glory in redeeming His image in us. No wonder the apostle Paul’s heartbeat was for discipleship. He saw the measureless privilege of being used by the Lord to advance the spiritual maturity of the believers around him (Col 1:28-29).

Jesus told the parable of the unfinished tower in the context of discipleship and its requisite sacrifices. Our Lord states that our profession of faith is very public matter, not unlike a building project. If one is going to succeed in the completion of a building, he must calculate the cost ahead of time. Otherwise, the unfinished structure will be a source of ridicule—exposing the poor planning of the builder (Lu 14:28-30). So also, anyone wishing to follow Christ as His disciple must consider the cost. We must examine the sacrifices required of us up front. “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Lu 14:26-27).

So, we are seeing that by the grace of God, your story needs an incredibly strong finish. In so many ways, a God-honoring story will demonstrate the same structure found in an outline of Romans (the longest treatise on salvation is the Bible). The outline of Romans is: 1) *Sin*, 2) *Salvation*, 3) *Sanctification*, 4) *Service*.

And, if your experience among Christians is anything like mine, you have met a multitude of professed believers who speak of salvation, but seem unmoved by the reality of sanctification and service. A God-honoring story is a complete story; all four of the elements found in the outline of Romans will be in that believer’s story. Sanctification and service will not be missing. Let us therefore be all the more determined to speak of these things and admonish one another: “But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13).