

# The Heart of the Gospel

Written by Lorie Kaufman Rees

## INTRODUCTION

### INTRO Part I

Everyone loves a good story.

Stories entertain us. They teach us. They thrill us. They move us. They connect us. And the best stories, even those that are fictional and fantastical, tell us what is True. Because story is THE greatest vehicle of Truth we humans have at our disposal.

This is most likely why Jesus communicated to people largely through the medium of story. Madeleine L'Engle, a prolific Christian author, once wrote “Jesus was not a theologian. He was God who told stories.”

The greatest God story told—indeed, THE greatest story we know and continually retell through the centuries—is the Gospel Story. And to best understand the Gospel Story, it helps to understand a bit about stories themselves.

**[INTRODUCTORY VIDEO]** – if unable to watch the video, the text is below.

One of my favorite books is *Tattoos on the Heart* by Gregory Boyle. Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who lives and works in the heart of LA's world-renowned gang territory where there are about 1100 gangs with around 86,000 members. In this book he shares several *stories*. That's all. Just stories. Real-life tales about the young men and women he's known. Loved. Saved. Buried. But this book—which is nothing more than a string of stories about his experiences in one of earth's most God-forsaken places—is one of the most profoundly moving and life-changing books I've ever read. Why is that?

I'm going to share with you just one of these stories, to illustrate why:

(Read the story from the book)

Why is this such a compelling story? There are many reasons we find such a story to be compelling, and upon closer inspection we find that actually ALL compelling stories have a similar structure. A sort of skeleton, if you will, onto which the flesh of the story clings.

Now, the most basic story structure exists of five parts: First, there is the **Exposition**, or the introduction to the story. It's the background information the reader needs to know or find out.

Next comes the **Rising Action**. Things are ramping up—movement is happening and things are building toward a climax of some sort. You might think of it like the first few stones that set off a massive avalanche—it's the setting of things into motion.

Then, of course, we have the actual **Climax**. This is usually the moment of greatest danger or decision-making for the main character. It is the emotional peak of the story, and it usually concludes with a **Turning Point**.

After the **Turning Point**, we then see **Falling Action**. We see the events that occur as a result of the climax and the turning point to which it has brought the main character.

Then, finally, we have the **Resolution**. All the dramatic tension and anxiety of the story is released, and the final outcome that has resulted from the previous events is revealed.

Turning back to the story I just read, we can see these five elements fairly clearly:

We learn first that Soledad is the mother of four sons—the oldest of which is a ganger and the second of which is a Marine. We see the action rise as two of her four children are killed by gang violence, which leads to a climax of grief, where she is faced with what to do with her sadness. Her entrance into the ER is our falling action, and resolution is found in her ability to pray for this young man's life and not allow the hurt to win.

Now, I would argue, as would many scholars and writers through the centuries, that you will find these five elements—Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, And Resolution—in nearly EVERY STORY ever written or told.

And that's really important for us to consider, because we're about to take a look at *the* most important story ever told—**God's story**. The GOSPEL STORY.

And it's a pretty compelling story, as well.

## **INTRO Part II**

Madeleine L'Engle, in *Herself*, writes about the idea of "story as truth." She writes, "We tell basically the same story in all parts of the world, over and over again in varying ways, but it is always the same story, of a universe created by God. We can tell more about God through the words of a story than through any amount of theology."

God has given us a story—THE story—through which we can best understand and know him. It is the *Gospel Story*. And just like the story I shared with you, it has the same five key elements that follow the structure of a compelling story.

The first element was Exposition—the back-story. We find this in Genesis—God created man and woman, man and woman rebelled, man and woman were dismissed from paradise and forever cursed. The scene has been set. This is what we know as the *Creation Story* and *The Fall*.

Next, we see the Rising Action—centuries of attempts to create and live by demanding and difficult law codes. It was through these law codes, if people could follow them perfectly, the world could again be reconciled to God. Humankind lives out—for century upon century—the effects of *The Fall*.

Then, after many, MANY years of waiting and struggle, there comes a Climax. A Perfect Man is sent who fulfills all of the codes of the law, and he is sacrificed on behalf of the entire world, taking their death sentence on, himself. But that's not all...

There is then the Falling Action—what happens *after* the Climax. And wow, what happens! This Perfect Man who died as a sacrifice for the sins of all RISES FROM THE DEAD, breaking the curse that came at the beginning of the story. These two elements are the heart of the story—*Redemption*.

What happens next is both Resolution AND a new Climax. What do I mean by this?

The world is changed forever by this sacrifice. We mark time by it. A church was built upon it that spans the globe. The law code is done away with, and death is no longer a threat to those who believe in this story. Eternal life is ours through the sacrifice of another. This is complete *Restoration*.

BUT—

This resolution of **God's** story is nothing to us but Exposition in our OWN story. It sets the background for our own rising events, which must conclude in our own Climax—our own point of decision-making. Our *turning point*.

And our decision is simply (and yet NOT simply) this: will we believe this incredible God-story and enter it ourselves, or will we reject it? Will God's story become our own story? And how will that impact the rest of our story from here?

They are important questions—and your own resolution to your *own* story will be based upon your answers.

### Group question:

It could be (and indeed has been) argued that, based on classic story structure, EVERY story is a redemption story. What are some examples of this you can give from stories that our told in our culture, such as movies or fairy tales? Why is the Gospel of Christ THE redemption story? Do YOU have a redemption story of your own?

## ENCOUNTERING THE WORD

**Read:** Colossians 1:9-23; *New International Version*

*<sup>9</sup> For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>10</sup> so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,<sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,<sup>12</sup> and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you<sup>[f]</sup> to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,<sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

*15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

*21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of [g] your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*

### **Romans 8:1-17; *The Message***

#### **The Solution Is Life on God's Terms**

*1-2 With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.*

*3-4 God went for the jugular when he sent his own Son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that.*

*The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.*

*5-8 Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored.*

*9-11 But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can hardly be thinking more of yourself than of him. Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won't know what we're talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God's terms. It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!*

*12-14 So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!*

*15-17 This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!*

**Discuss:**

1. **We've identified there are four elements of the gospel story—creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration. Where do you see each element mentioned or alluded to within the Colossians passage?**
  - a. Creation: verses 15-18; The Fall: verse 21; Redemption: verses 19-21; Restoration: verses 22-23.
  - b. Verses 13-14 could almost be seen as a summary of the gospel in this passage.
  
2. **In Colossians 1:13, we read we are rescued and redeemed by God. What does it mean to be rescued? To be redeemed? What are some prevalent metaphors for rescue and/or redemption? What is it, exactly, you are rescued and redeemed FROM?**
  - a. Rescue: To set free, as from danger or imprisonment. To save. To bring (someone or something) out of danger, attack, harm, etc.
  - b. Redeem: *(There are many meanings, and several can be significant to the discussion.)* To recover ownership of by paying a specified sum. To pay off (a promissory note, for example). To fulfill (a pledge, for example). To convert into cash: redeem stocks. To set free; rescue or ransom. To save from a state of sinfulness and its consequences. To make up for. To restore the honor, worth, or reputation of.
  - c. The answer to the final portion of this question may be very personal or very general in nature. The general answer is obviously sin and the consequence of eternal death. For each member, however, this means something different and personal.
  
3. **In every story, one of the primary characters must make a “critical choice.” What is the choice WE each must face in our own redemption story? How does Colossians 1:9-12 speak to that choice?**
  - a. Jesus asks a “Critical Choice” question to Peter in Mark 8:29, when he asks “Who do you say I am?” This is, in essence, the critical question we must answer. Will we choose to see Jesus as the (OUR) Messiah, or will we not?
  - b. Verses nine and ten hint to me of this “critical choice”—Paul’s prayer that they would have knowledge of the will of God and understand it in such a way that bears fruit (verses 10-12) We also see a hint of this in verse 23, where he urges the people

to “continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.”

4. **I (Lorie) was once asked two very important questions that radically changed my Christian walk. The two questions were: “What were you saved FROM?” and “What were you saved TO?” I found, at that time, I could only clearly answer the first. Why is it important that we must be able to answer both? How would you answer each? And how does this Colossians passage answer both?**
  - a. Saved FROM: verse 13 (For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness...); verse 14 (sin); verse 21 (Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.).
  - b. Saved TO: verse 12 (...to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.); verse 13-14 (...brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.); verse 20 (...and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.)
  
5. **Based on Paul’s letter to the Roman church (We are now in Romans 8), why was the Gospel such “good news” to the Jewish people? Why is it good news to US in the Christian church in the United States? Why is it good news to YOU, personally?**
  - a. The Jewish people were under the law code, which was impossible to keep perfectly. In order to be made right before God, endless sacrifices were necessary. It was a lifetime of never measuring up, and therefore created a constant fear of being under God’s judgment. The Gospel is good news because it is the first the Jews have heard about God’s GRACE and his plan to reconcile us to him forever.
  - b. In our American culture, there is a constant pressure to “measure up” or to “be the best.” There is a tendency to believe that simply “being a good person” will ensure us happiness and salvation, but none of us are able to BE that person. The good news, again, is the news of GRACE.
  
6. **How is Paul, in Romans 8, proposing we, as those who are in Christ, engage with the Gospel? How is this different from how you normally engage with God? With sin?**
  - a. Verse 7: The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn’t deliver is accomplished as we, *instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.*

- b. Our tendency, as humans, can often be to simply try harder or to come up with a better plan. Paul turns this upside down—WE do nothing but listen to the Holy Spirit and RESPOND.

**7. What is the dilemma Paul talks about in verse 8:1? How do you see this dilemma at work in your own life?**

- a. We must turn back to Romans 7 to answer this question. In the Message, we read: *For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't **do** it. I decide to do good, but I don't **really** do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.*
- b. *It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.*
- c. *I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?*
- d. *The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.*
- e. So the dilemma, then, is our inability to reconcile ourselves to God through the law code.

**8. What "laws" have you created in your own life and walk with Christ to "put band-aids" on your own sin? What can this tend to look like in church life? In group life? In our society?**

- a. Some personal laws: must have quiet time EVERY day (in the MORNING), must use the ACTS form of prayer, must be a leader, must be perfect, must not ever experience anger, etc.
- b. Some church life laws: don't drink, don't eat this or that, don't cuss, don't play cards, don't disagree with the pastor, don't argue, etc.
- c. Some societal laws:

**9. Where have you been faced with your own "Critical Choice" when it comes to God? How did you choose?**

**10. Based on your discussion tonight, what one to two words would you use to summarize or characterize the heart of the Gospel? Share them around the circle.**

## **RESPONDING TO JESUS**

### **Personal response(s):**

Identify one area in our life within which you do NOT operate as if you possess the *Good News* of the Gospel of Christ. What is the implication of the Gospel over that area of your life? How can you “embrace what the spirit is doing” in this area over the next week? How would your life be different if you approached this issue or area with an “adventurous expectation?”

### **Group response(s):**

What would your group time look like if you spent more time “embracing what the spirit is doing?” What are some ways you could practice this within group life? How might doing so better help each of you in your understanding and application of the Gospel?

### **Group prayer:**

*Lord, we acknowledge we have a tendency to either strive really, really hard to be perfect or to simply put Band-Aids on our own sin. We swing frequently between living in our flesh and living by the law. We want to learn to live by your Spirit, Lord—to recognize and embrace what it’s doing inside of us. We recognize THIS is the heart of your Gospel—to rely purely on YOU to make us right before you. Let your work continue in us, Lord, and may we grow to be more and more like your Son as we listen more and more to your Spirit. Grant us, as David prayed, willing spirits to sustain us. And accept our humble and heartfelt gratitude for the grace and tenderness with which you write each of our own stories...*

*Amen.*