

THE COMPASS

The Story I Tell Myself

Untidy Christianity, Part 2

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Out in the sticks, a guy sees a sign in front of a house: "Talking Dog for Sale."

He rings the bell and the owner tells him the dog is in the backyard.

The guy goes into the backyard and sees a black mutt just sitting there.

"You talk?" he asks.

"Yep," the mutt replies.

"So, what's your story?"

The mutt looks up and says, "Well, I discovered this gift when I was young and I wanted to help the government, so I told the CIA about my gift, and in no time they had me jetting from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders, because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping.

"I was one of their most valuable spies eight years running. The jetting around really tired me out, and I knew I wasn't getting any younger and wanted to settle down. So I signed up for a job at the airport to do some undercover security work, mostly wandering near suspicious characters and listening in. I uncovered some incredible dealings there and was awarded a batch of medals.

"Had a wife, a mess of puppies, and now I'm just retired."

The guy is amazed. He goes back in and asks the owner what he wants for the dog.

The owner says, "Ten dollars."

The guy says, "This dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?"

The owner replies, "He's such a liar. He didn't do any of that stuff."

Perspective is so important!

I want to think of myself as a realist. I see things clearly. I make judgments on the basis of facts.

But the truth is, I am not always realistic. I see things through filters. I make judgments on the basis of my perceptions, not on the basis of the facts but on my own personal VIEW of the facts.

Christian psychologist Dr. Vern McNally says, "You don't live with the facts; you live with the story you tell yourself about the facts."

Economist Kenneth Boulding writes that "people's behavior is often based on pictures they hold of the world that may have little empirical basis but that serve as 'reality.'"

This is a crucial concept for us to recognize in ourselves, because it will dramatically affect our relationship with God and with those around us.

We're studying the life of David in the Old Testament, and as we approach the famous story of David and Goliath we see this principle in action.

Let me read the beginning of the historical account to you, from 1 Samuel 17:1-37.

1 Samuel 17:

1 Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Socoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Socoh and Azekah. 2 Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. 3 The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

4 A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. 5 He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels [about 125 pounds]; 6 on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. 7 His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels [about 15 pounds]. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

8 Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. 9 If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." 10 Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." 11 On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

Look at the history of these people.

Saul has experienced the power and provision of God.

His story begins in 1 Samuel 9 with the supernatural intervention of God into his life. From the moment he was anointed king, God helped him score incredible military victories.

The Israelite army has experienced the power and provision of God.

But when they hear Goliath's challenge, they act as if God has never helped them before.

They aren't seeing things clearly. They don't have the God's-eye view of this situation. They aren't living with the facts; they're living with the story they're telling themselves about the facts.

They're letting Goliath write the story for them — and that story is producing fear.

If I feel afraid about something, maybe I need to ask myself:

What story am I telling myself?

Do I need to get back in touch with God's power and provision in my life?

Do I need to go back and recall some of the great things God has done for me?

12 Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse had eight sons, and in Saul's time he was old and well advanced in years. 13 Jesse's three oldest sons had followed Saul to the war: The firstborn was Eliab; the second, Abinadab; and the third, Shammah. 14 David was the youngest. The three oldest followed Saul, 15 but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at

Bethlehem.

16 For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.

17 Now Jesse said to his son David, “Take this ephah [*probably about 3/5 bushel (about 22 liters)*] of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. **18** Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. **19** They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines.”

20 Early in the morning David left the flock with a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. **21** Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. **22** David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and greeted his brothers. **23** As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. **24** When the Israelites saw the man, they all ran from him in great fear.

25 Now the Israelites had been saying, “Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his father’s family from taxes in Israel.”

26 David asked the men standing near him, “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

27 They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, “This is what will be done for the man who kills him.”

28 When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle.”

29 “Now what have I done?” said David. “Can’t I even speak?”

Eliab has a history too. He remembers the day Samuel, the prophet, came to town to anoint the future king of Israel.

Eliab was first in line — Samuel even thought he was the guy.

But God said no. David, the baby of the family, was the one who got the nod.

Now Eliab has an attitude problem. He resents David.

We can see that this kind of interaction has happened before: David says, “Now what have I done?” — as if to say, *Here’s Eliab, climbing my frame again!*

(Somebody said, The other night I ate at a real family restaurant. Every table had an argument going.)

Clearly this isn’t the kind of heart that God wanted in the next king of Israel. God clearly made the right call.

But Eliab isn't seeing things clearly. He doesn't have the God's-eye view of this situation.

He isn't living with the facts. He's living with the story he's telling himself about the facts.

And that story is producing resentment in his heart.

When I feel resentment against somebody, maybe I need to ask myself:

What story am I telling myself?

Do I need to get back in touch with God's authority and wisdom?

Do I need to re-orient myself to his sovereignty?

Do I need to remember that God is God and I'm not?

30 He then turned away to someone else and brought up the same matter, and the men answered him as before. 31 What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.

32 David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

33 Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth."

34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, 35 I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. 36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. 37 The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you."

Just like Saul and the Israelites, just like Eliab, David has a history with God too.

He was out there in the wilderness, on sheep duty, for years.

He had the junk job of the family.

It was dirty work, boring, lonely; it was looked down on.

It was dangerous out there too.

Those were the facts.

But David isn't living with the facts. He's living with the story he told himself about the facts.

He carries his guitar; he writes songs.

He could complain, but instead he fills his days with worship. He tells himself that God loves him, and that God is good.

When a wild animal attacks, he trusts God to help him. He could run away in terror, but he tells himself that God loves him, and that God is going to help him.

And because this is the story he has chosen to rehearse in his heart and mind all these years, David is in position to get the God's-eye view of this new crisis.

He's been in training. He has been exercising his perspective.

He's not just flying off on some crazy notion about taking the giant down.

David sees the principle at stake: he says, “**because [Goliath] has defied ... the living God....**”

David sees God’s design in this situation.

He has years of storytelling experience. He has been telling himself a true story about God’s power and provision, God’s wisdom and sovereignty, so he can write the end of this story accurately, even before it takes place.

The story David has been telling himself produces confidence. Boldness. Peace — even in the face of an unprecedented threat.

When life surprises me ... when I face a crisis ... when I’m threatened or someone I care about gets in trouble ... am I prepared to see that situation the way God sees it?

That will depend on the story I have been telling myself ... because the kind of story I tell myself, day after day, year after year, will shape who I am.

Proverbs 23:7 (NASB) says, “**For as he thinks within himself, so he is.**”

Saul, Eliab, and David all lived in the same country. They faced the same enemy. They shared the same God.

But Saul shaped his destiny by the kind of stories he told himself about himself and his God.

The Israelites paralyzed themselves by the kind of stories they told themselves about God.

Eliab shaped his character and his destiny by the kind of stories he told himself.

David’s destiny was galvanized by the kind of stories he told himself about himself and his God.

The story I tell myself will affect how life *tastes* to me.

Once there were three bricklayers busily working at their trade.

The first one was asked what he was doing. “I’m laying bricks,” he answered gruffly.

The second one was asked what he was doing. “I’m putting up a wall,” he replied.

The third one was asked what he was doing. He looked up, his face shining with pride: “I’m building a cathedral!” he said.

Psalm 1 describes a happy person this way:

Psalm 1:

2 ...His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law [on God’s design] he meditates day and night. [He’s telling himself the story of God’s plan for his life.]

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

To change my life, I have to change the story I tell myself.

In **Romans 12:2**, Paul the apostle advises, “**...Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.**”

If I feel out of synch with God, if my relationship with him doesn’t feel good or pleasing, the story I tell myself — about his plan, his character, his Word — needs to change.

I am not stuck with the story I’m telling myself today. I can rewrite the story.

Jeremiah demonstrates this.

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet.

He not only wrote the book of Jeremiah, he also wrote the book that follows it: the book of Lamentations.

What a name! Lamentations! An entire book of whining!

Page after page, Jeremiah whines and complains about how God has let him down, God has confused him, God has let him suffer.

But finally — finally, in chapter 3, a full 20 verses in — he wises up, and starts telling himself a different story:

Lamentations 3:

21 Yet this I call to mind [*this different story I tell myself*] and therefore I have hope:

22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion [*in other words, he's all I need*]; therefore I will wait for him."

25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;

26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord....

31 For men are not cast off by the Lord forever.

32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.

And finally, in verses 40 and 41, he offers this recommendation:

40 Let us examine our ways and test them [*let's tell ourselves the true story*], and let us return to the Lord.

41 Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven....

I think this is good advice for us this evening.

When Jesus served the Passover supper to his best friends for the final time before his death, he didn't say, "Do this as a ritual."

He didn't say, "Do this as a new regulation; it's a rule now, so you better do it right."

He said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

In other words, As you do this, remember what I've done for you.

Tell yourself a story about me ... you and me together ... Jesus, and Doug. Jesus, and Sue. Jesus, and Tami.

As I partake of Christ's body through the eating of the bread this evening, I'm going to do it in remembrance of the time Jesus snagged me from a dangerous situation in Westlake, Ohio.

As I partake of Christ's blood through the drinking of the cup this evening, I'm going to do it in remembrance of how God gave me a second chance back in the mid-1980's, even after I had just about ruined my life, and allowed me back into the ministry.

I'm going to do this in remembrance of how God brought our daughter Natalie back to us, at the age of 6, after we thought we had lost her forever.

I'm going to do this in remembrance of his power to keep my family healthy ... his provision of a paycheck that keeps a roof over our heads ... his wisdom in

guiding my steps ... his sovereignty over the events of my life even when I think I know better and want him to do things differently — who knows how many tragedies he has spared me from?....

Psalm 77 says:

- 1 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.**
- 2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.**
- 3 I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.**
- 4 You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.**
- 5 I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;**
- 6 I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired:**
- 7 “Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?**
- 8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?**
- 9 Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”**
- 10 Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High.”**
- 11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.**
- 12 I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.**
- 13 Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?**
- 14 You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples....**

What will you receive the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of this evening?
 Has God been good to you? Has he manifested grace in your life? Has he cut you slack when you didn’t deserve it? Has he given you blessings?
 As we prepare to receive the bread and the cup, I’d like you to take a moment to rehearse the story of you and Jesus. What he’s done for you. How he’s protected you. Where he’s blessed you.
 What is the story we’re telling ourselves?