

Understanding the Big Picture of Life During the Times of Trouble

The following extracts are summaries of two lessons of a Bible Study Course written by myself (the first 5 pages) as well as extracts from a terrific book called "The Sacred Romance" written by John Eldridge and Brent Curtis. These extracts were specifically chosen to give simple, clear and encouraging answers to those who are rocked by the worst of trials that kick us all in the teeth at times.

The best way to cope with what life throws at us is to be able to understand the big picture of what life is all about and how these trials fit in. When we go through these troubles what we really want to know, most of all, is "Will life get better? Will things really work out in the end?" When we understand what the Bible teaches about the big picture of life we find out in no uncertain terms that it will work out in the end. As one person put it: "I've read the end of the book and in the end we win!"

It is my hope that the reader will be encouraged and helped by the information in the following pages. In the pages that follow you will learn the simple truth about the biggest questions of life such as:

- Why did God create man?
- Why does God allow such unbelievable suffering?
- Will God step in and fix this planet and all its troubles?
- Why did God cut Himself off from mankind
- Is this the only time that God is trying to "save" everybody?
- What is the real truth about heaven and hell?
- Will my deceased loved ones live again and have a chance at salvation if they weren't "saved"?
- What is man's ultimate destiny – to float in the clouds of heaven or something much more exciting?

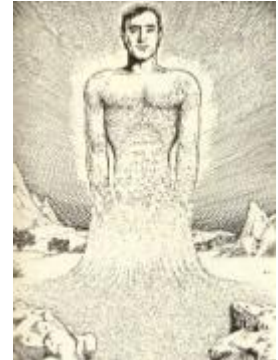
What you are taught in most churches about these questions, believe it or not, is not the simple truth as found in the Bible. The real answers from the Bible to these questions will both surprise and encourage you so be prepared for some surprises!

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WHAT IS MAN'S ULTIMATE DESTINY?

1] Why did God create man?

- The earth was originally created millions of years ago (**Genesis 1:1**) and then it became “waste and void” shortly prior to 6 000 years ago as a result of the rebellion of Satan and the demons (**Genesis 1:2**). In six days nearly 6 000 years ago, God renewed the surface of the earth (**Genesis 1, Psalm 104:30**).
- On the sixth day God created man saying: “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness” (**Genesis 1:26**). The animals were created after their own kind but man was made after the GOD kind. God wanted to share the wonderful life that He has and can offer to others with children of His own. God wanted to have beings with different viewpoints and experiences to share their company with. God the Father and Jesus Christ wanted to fellowship and work together with a diversity of beings at their own level of God existence and so began the great plan of God **TO REPRODUCE HIMSELF THROUGH MANKIND!**
- God created the first man and called him Adam. He then took a rib from him and created Eve and put them in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 2:15-23**).



2] When did God create Adam and Eve?

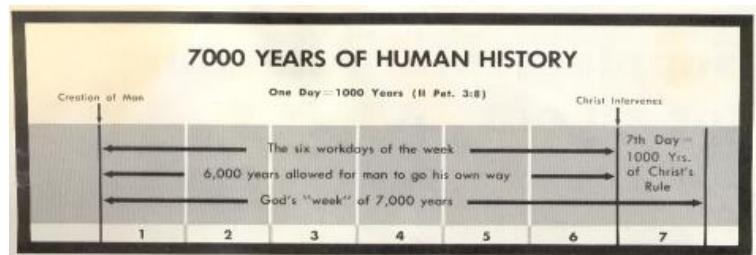
- The book of Genesis is richly detailed with chronological data giving us the ages of so many of the patriarchs. Because of these details we know that God created man nearly 6 000 years ago. Most historians and Bible scholars date the beginning of Solomon's reign to **971 BC** (give or take a few years). If we use **971 BC** as the beginning of Solomon's reign then the Exodus occurred around 1447 BC and Abraham left for the land of Canaan in 1877 BC (**1 Kings 6:1, Galatians 3:16-17**). Using the dates of **Genesis 5 and 11** we also come up with an approximate date of **3960 BC** for the year that God created Adam and Eve. Remember that is only an approximate date. That would put the 6000th anniversary of this momentous event around the year **2040 AD**.

3] What was the purpose of the two trees in the Garden of Eden?

- **God cannot instantly create character. He would have created us instantly perfect if He could have. Character requires free will and for the person to choose God's way and live by it even against temptation and self-desire.**
- To develop their character, God tested Adam and Eve to see if they would live by His way or not. This test involved two trees (**Genesis 2:9-17**). One was the tree of life which symbolized receiving God's Holy Spirit and the power to live God's way. The other tree was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were plainly told that they could not eat from that tree.
- Satan appealed to Eve's vanity and deceived her into thinking that she would be wise like God if she ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree. Adam wasn't deceived and ate the fruit to please his wife when she offered it to them (**Genesis 3:1-17**).
- Their act of deliberate disobedience led to God casting them out of the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 3:22-24**). God sentenced them and their descendants to being cut off from Him and the help of His Holy Spirit to live His way for 6 000 years before God would intervene and take over the government of the world.

4] Why did God cut Himself off from mankind?

- God ordained that 6 000 years of sinning human existence PROVE FOR ALL TIME that Satan's way can result only in evils, suffering, frustration, hopelessness, and death. God is allowing Satan to deceive and sway mankind for 6 000 years to prove this truth for all time.
- God's Master Plan involves a duration of 7000 years (**2 Peter 3:8, Hebrews 4:1-9**). The seven days of Creation were a type.



- Just as there were six days of work followed by God resting on the Sabbath, God has given man six millennial days to labour with sin without His help followed by a millennium of spiritual rest.
- **The millennium will then be followed by the second resurrection when all who have not been “saved” from Adam to the second coming of Christ will be resurrected to physical life to receive their first real chance at salvation (**Revelation 20:4-5, 12-13, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Matthew 10:14-15, 11:20-24, 12:41-42**).**

- As painful as it would be for mankind, God's decision to allow Satan to stay and tempt mankind for 6000 years would deepen the contrast between God's way of life and the way of sin. It would allow the worst of humanity to display itself and build up the FULL range of sin and wrong experience to prove for the rest of **eternity** that sin hurts.
- Why were we created physical and mortal? Why weren't we created as spirit beings that are immune to physical pain? One reason is to understand more deeply the lesson that sin hurts than we could have if we were created as spirit beings like the angels. Without feeling pain we are often a lot slower in changing our ways to stop doing things that are destructive to ourselves and others. Another reason is to help keep us humble and to more deeply appreciate God's greatness when we see it compared to our own minute power in comparison.

5] Why do we have so much suffering in the world?

- We live in a world of such awesome technical progress and advancement yet plagued with terrible evil and suffering at the same time. Why is there such suffering? There are a number of reasons. Mankind, as a whole, is cut off from God (**Hosea 4:6**) and the help of His Holy Spirit (except for those few He is calling ahead of time) and Satan continues to tempt mankind to do evil (**Matthew 4:3, Revelation 12:9**).
- A tragedy in our life can occur for many different reasons. It could happen because of a sin or bad choice on our part (**Galatians 6:7**). It could happen because of someone else's sin. It could happen because of negligence on our part or that of someone else. It could happen because of time and chance (**Ecclesiastes 9:11**) such as being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- God will often allow christians to suffer pain and poverty to help teach them lessons such as humility, patience, faith and dependence on Him (**1 Peter 1:6-7**). Some of God's servants were quite wealthy like Abraham and Solomon. Others were quite poor yet no less righteous.
- Sometimes God allows church members to suffer different kinds of tragedies so they can comfort and help those with similar problems in the future during the millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment period (**2 Corinthians 1:3-5, Colossians 1:24**).



6] What is salvation?

- Salvation means to be preserved from destruction or evil. Spiritually speaking, salvation means to be saved from the penalty of sin (**Romans 5:9-10**). Sin is breaking God's laws (**1 John 3:4**) and the penalty for sin is death (**Romans 6:23**). Jesus Christ has paid that penalty on our behalf so we don't have to pay it (**Romans 5:6-10**). As our Creator His life was worth more than all of our lives put together.
- Salvation is a process. We are "saved now" from past sins (**Ephesians 2:8**). We are "being saved" from the sins (bad habits) that have earned us the death penalty (**1 Corinthians 1:18**) and then we shall be "fully saved" at the resurrection to immortality (**Matthew 24:13, Romans 5:9**).
- Because we continue to sin in this life we need to ask God to forgive us regularly so the new sins that we commit after baptism don't leave another death penalty hanging over us again (**1 John 1:9**). We are not fully and completely saved until the resurrection to immortality when our character is fully set and we will not sin ever again (**Hebrews 12:23, 1 John 3:9**).
- Salvation is a gift (**Ephesians 2:8**) which we can NEVER earn but if we never fulfil the conditions of repentance and baptism (**Acts 2:38-39**) He'll NEVER give it to us. Repentance is an ongoing condition to retain God's Holy Spirit in us (**Psalms 51:11**).
- As long as we have God's Holy Spirit when Christ returns or at death if we die beforehand, then God will resurrect us to immortality at Christ's return (**Romans 8:11**). If we continue to regularly strive to overcome sin and confess our sins when we stumble we will continue to have the Holy Spirit. We can lose the Holy Spirit by deliberately turning from God's way of life or from neglecting to live God's way (**Hebrews 10:26**).

7] What does it mean to be born again?

- The way in which a baby is born is patterned after how God plans to reproduce Himself through mankind.
- All human life comes from a tiny egg called an ovum which is produced inside a human mother. This ovum has a very limited life of about 24 hours unless it is fertilized by a sperm cell from a male. Compared to eternity, our human life, of an average of 70 years, is very limited (**1 Peter 1:24**).
- The spirit in man in each of us is like the ovum and God's spirit is like the sperm from the father. At baptism the two unite to form a newly begotten spiritual life (**Romans 8:15-17**). A new God being has been begotten but he or she still has a long way to go before he or she is born into God's family.
- Like an embryo in its mother's womb is nourished, we must be nourished by spiritual food (**Matthew 4:4**). The church acts as our mother providing that spiritual food through the messages that we receive through the ministry (**Ephesians 4:11-15**).

- Not all babies make it to that moment of being born into the world. Sometimes a woman has a miscarriage when a baby doesn't develop properly. Likewise, we can be a spiritual miscarriage if we don't grow in God's character after we have received God's spirit ([Hebrews 2:3](#), [1 Corinthians 9:27](#)).
- After a period of nine months on average comes the big day when the baby is finally born. At the resurrection those who have God's spirit will be transformed and be born into God's family on the same God level of existence as God the Father and Jesus Christ ([1 Corinthians 15:50-53](#)). If one is born of the spirit (born again) HE IS SPIRIT ([John 3:5-6](#))!

8] How can God change us from matter to spirit beings?

- The spirit that is in every human acts as a mould ([Job 32:8](#), [1 Corinthians 2:9-11](#)). It preserves the human's memory, his character, his form and shape. The flesh and blood physical body, after death, decomposes and decays, but the spirit that was IN that body, like the sculptor's mould, preserves all the form and shape, the memory, and the character intact. And that mould, being spirit does not change -- even though the resurrection may take place thousands of years after death.
- The resurrected being will be COMPOSED of SPIRIT, not matter as the human model was. In the resurrected SPIRIT form he will suddenly come ALIVE. It will seem like the next flash of a second from his loss of consciousness at time of death.

9] Can man really become God?

- What makes Jesus different from the angels are the same two things that will make us human beings different from the angels at the resurrection. We will also be begotten and then born sons of God just like Jesus Christ and we will also inherit all things ([Hebrews 2:5-8](#)).
- The first commandment in [Exodus 20:3](#) tells us that no other being or kind of being can be worshipped except for God. In [Revelation 22:8-9](#) we see that we are not supposed to worship angels.
- In the same book in [Revelation 3:9](#) Christ says the following to the Philadelphia church: "I will make them [false christians] come and **WORSHIP** before your feet and know that I have loved you." The Greek word used in [Revelation 3:9](#) is EXACTLY THE SAME GREEK WORD, "PROSKUNEO" that is used in [Revelation 22:8-9](#) - the worship which could only be directed to God and not to angels.

10] What will we be doing for eternity when we are born into God's family?

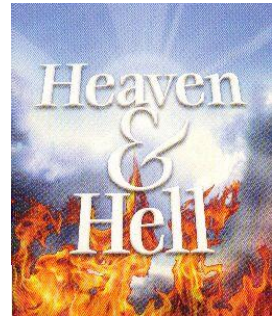
- The universe is currently in a state of decay. It is running down and is eagerly awaiting our birth into God's family so it can be set free from that decay ([Romans 8:18-23](#)). Once we are finished fixing up planet Earth, the whole universe with its billions and billions of stars and planets awaits us. God is in the creating business and we will join the family business of creating and beautifying the entire universe for all eternity with God the Father and Jesus Christ.
- God is reproducing Himself through us and He wants to share His wonderful God level of existence with each and every of us! That is our incredible human potential!



WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL?

1] Do you have an immortal soul?

- In **Genesis 2:7** we read that when God created Adam he became a soul. The Hebrew word that is translated soul everywhere it is found in the Old Testament is “nephesh”. This Hebrew word means “a breathing creature” and is also used to describe animals (**Genesis 1:21, 24, 2:19, 9:10, 12, 15, 16**) and even a dead body (**Leviticus 19:28, 21:1, 22:4**). The soul is not something in the body. It is the body!
- The Bible says that souls are not immortal. In two places in the Bible it says that souls can die (**Ezekiel 18:4 & 20**).
- The Greek word translated as soul in the New Testament is “psuche”. It also means a breathing creature and is applied to animals (**Revelation 8:9, 16:3**).
- According to Jesus the soul can be destroyed by God (**Matthew 10:28**).
- Satan told Eve she would “not surely die” (**Genesis 3:1-5**) — that she had an “immortal soul” that would live forever. This was the origin of the big lie that man has an immortal soul.
- The teaching that man has an immortal soul which either goes to heaven or hell at death can be traced back to Egypt. From Egypt the belief was passed onto the Greek philosophers. The early Catholic teachers were heavily influenced by pagan Greek ideas and this is how this teaching became Catholic and Protestant doctrine.
- Eternal life is a gift from God (**Romans 6:23**) not something that we automatically have.
- At the resurrection we will PUT ON IMMORTALITY! (**1 Corinthians 15:51-53**) There is no point to the resurrection if we already have an immortal soul.
- The spirit that is in every human acts as a mould (**Job 32:8, 1 Corinthians 2:9-11**). It preserves the human’s memory, his character, his form and shape. The flesh and blood physical body, after death, decomposes and decays, but the spirit that was IN that body, like the sculptor’s mould, preserves all the form and shape, the memory, and the character intact.
- The resurrected being will be COMPOSED of SPIRIT, not matter as the human model was. In the resurrected SPIRIT form he will suddenly come ALIVE. It will seem like the next flash of a second from his loss of consciousness at time of death. The spirit in man has no consciousness of itself.
- Those who are dead have no consciousness between their death and the resurrection (**Ecclesiastes 9:5, Psalm 6:4-5, 115:17, Job 14:21, John 11:11-14, Daniel 12:2-3**).



2] Does anyone go to heaven when they die?

- Jesus said that no man has gone to heaven except Himself (**John 3:13**).
- Christians are called Abraham’s seed in **Galatians 3:16 and 29** and will inherit the same land that God has given to Abraham as an inheritance. Paul said in **Romans 4:13** that the promise to Abraham and to his seed – true christians – has expanded to include the whole world.
- Those who have died and had God’s Holy Spirit will be resurrected when Christ returns to earth. When Christ returns they will reign with Christ on earth for a thousand years (**Revelation 5:10, 20:6**).
- We are not going to heaven – HEAVEN IS COMING DOWN TO EARTH! God the Father will eventually bring the New Jerusalem to earth and this will become the headquarters of the universe (**Revelation 21:1-3**)!
- The promised land to Abraham and his seed, which has expanded to include the whole earth, will continue to expand and include the whole universe (**Isaiah 9:6-7, Hebrews 2:8, Romans 8:18-23**)!

3] Does anyone go to hell when they die?

- The word hell in the Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew word “sheol” which means the grave.
- In the New Testament there are three Greek words that are translated as hell – “hades”, “tartaros” and “gehenna”. Hades means the grave. Tartaros means a place of restraint or prison for the fallen angels (**2 Peter 2:4**). Gehenna is derived from Valley of Hinnom which lay just outside Jerusalem. Trash, as well as the dead bodies of animals and despised criminals, were thrown into the fires of gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom.
- Christ used gehenna to picture the terrible fate of unrepentant sinners in **Matthew 10:28**. Christ said that God will destroy both the soul (life) and body of the wicked in hell. They won’t burn and burn forever! They will be destroyed!
- Those who aren’t “saved” in this life when they die don’t go straight to hell. They await a future resurrection (**John 5:28-29**).



This is hell (gehenna) - The Valley of Hinnom just south of the old city of Jerusalem.

4] Is this life everyone's only chance for salvation?

- In God's mercy all mankind will be given every opportunity to repent and become a part of God's family. Those who still rebel against God will not burn forever but will die very quickly – the second death (**Revelation 20:12-15**). They will perish – cease to exist (**Luke 13:3, Matthew 3:12, Hebrews 10:26-27, Malachi 4:1-3, Romans 6:23**).
- God is not trying to save all of mankind now. He has called and chosen to be a part of the church only a few at this time (**John 6:44, 1 Corinthians 1:26, Mark 4:11-12**).
- All people who have not received salvation up to Christ's second coming will get another chance – a first real chance at salvation when God resurrects them at the end of the millennium (**Revelation 20:4-5, 12-13, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Matthew 10:14-15, 11:20-24, 12:41-42**). This is the Great White Throne Judgment period. God's Holy Spirit will be offered to them (**Ezekiel 37:14**) and they will probably have a full 100 years to repent and be converted (**Isaiah 65:20**).
- God is truly is a God of justice and fairness who will give everyone a full and equal chance at salvation. He does not want anyone to perish but to have eternal life and be born into His family (**John 3:16**)!



The Sacred Romance

The following extract is from a terrific book called "The Sacred Romance" by John Eldridge and Brent Curtis which talks about the great story that God is writing in the lives of each of us in which they do a great job using stories to answer the question "Is God indifferent to all I suffer?"

God is Writing a Great Story Through Our Lives

The Arrows [of life] strike at the most vital places in our hearts, the things we care most about. The deepest questions we ever ask are directly related to our heart's greatest needs and the answers life gives us shape our images of ourselves, of life, and of God. Who am I? The Romance whispers that we are someone special, that our heart is good because it is made for someone good; the Arrows tell us we are a dime a dozen, worthless, even dark and twisted, dirty. Where is life to be found? The Romance tells us life will flourish when we give it away in love and heroic sacrifice. The Arrows tell us that we must arrange for what little life there may be, manipulating our world and all the while watching our backs. "God is good," the Romance tells us. "You can release the well-being of your heart to him." The Arrows strike back, "Don't ever let life out of your control," and they seem to impale with such authority, unlike the gentle urges of the Romance, that in the end we are driven to find some way to contain them. The only way seems to be to kill our longing for the Romance, much in the same way we harden our heart to someone who hurts us. If I don't want so much, we believe, I won't be so vulnerable. Instead of dealing with the Arrows, we silence the longing. That seems to be our only hope. And so we lose heart.

Which is the truer message? If we try to hang on to the Romance, what are we to do with our wounds and the awful tragedies of life? How can we keep our heart alive in the face of such deadly Arrows? Is it possible for Mike to risk opening his heart to love again? Can Sam ever totally trust the God he served for so long? How many losses can a heart take? If we deny the wounds or try to minimize them, we deny a part of our heart and end up living a shallow optimism that frequently becomes a demand that the world be better than it is. On the other hand, if we embrace the Arrows as the final word on life, we despair, which is another way to lose heart. To lose hope has the same effect on our heart as it would be to stop breathing. If only there were someone to help us reconcile our deepest longings with our greatest fears (p.32-33)...

The deepest convictions of our heart are formed by stories and reside there in the images and emotions of story. As a young boy, around the time my heart began to suspect that the world was a fearful place and I was on my own to find my way through it, I read the story of a Scottish discus thrower from the nineteenth century. He lived in the days before professional trainers and developed his skills alone, in the highlands of his native village. He even made his own iron discus from the description he read in a book. What he did not know was that the discus used in competition was made of wood with an outer rim of iron. His was solid metal and weighed three or four times as much as those being used by his would-be challengers.

This committed Scotsman marked out in his field the distance of the current record throw and trained day and night to be able to match it. For nearly a year, he labored under the self-imposed burden of the extra weight. But he became very, very good. He reached the point at which he could throw his iron discus the record distance, maybe farther. He was ready. My Scotsman (I had begun to closely identify with him) traveled south to England for his first competition. When he arrived at the games, he was handed the official wooden discus which he promptly threw like a tea saucer. He set a new record, a distance so far beyond those of his competitors that no one could touch him. He thus remained the uncontested champion for many years. Something in my heart connected with this story. **So, that's how you do it. Train under a great burden and you will be so far beyond the rest of the world you will be untouchable. It became a defining image for my life, formed in and from a story.**

Life is not a list of propositions, it is a series of dramatic scenes. As Eugene Peterson said, "We live in narrative, we live in story. Existence has a story shape to it. We have a beginning and an end, we have a plot, we have characters." Story is the language of the heart. Our souls speak not in the naked facts of mathematics or the abstract propositions of systematic theology; they speak the images and emotions of story. Contrast your enthusiasm for studying a textbook with the offer to go to a movie, read a novel, or listen to the stories of someone else's life. Elie Wiesel suggests that "God created man because he loves stories." So if we're going to find the answer to the riddle of the earth - and of our own existence - we'll find it in story (p.38-40)...

The resurrection of our heart requires that the Sacred Romance be true and that is precisely what the Scriptures tell us. As Frederick Bucchner reminds us in his wonderful book "Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale" the world of the gospel is the world of fairy tale, with one notable exception:

"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" (p.46)...

The Struggle We Have With Believing That God Is Indifferent

Embedded in our stories, deep down in our heart, in a place so well guarded that they have rarely if ever been exposed to the light of day, are other grief-laden and often angry questions: "God, why did you allow this to happen to me? Why did you make me like this? What will you allow to happen next?" In the secret places of our heart, we believe God is the One who did not protect us from these things or even the One who perpetrated them upon us. Our questions about him make us begin to live with a deep apprehension that clings anxiously to the depths of our hearts. "Do you really care for me, God?"

This is the question that has shipwrecked many of our hearts, leaving them grounded on reefs of pain and doubt, no longer free to accompany us on spiritual pilgrimage. We might be able to rationalize away that question by telling ourselves that we need to be more careful, or that sometimes others are just bad. We can even breathe a sigh of relief when we realize that trouble has come from our own sin. But even the careful, legalistic, and constricted lifestyle that arises out of thinking we can avoid trouble through our own devices shipwrecks when the Arrows seem to strike us out of nowhere. What are we to make of God's wildness in allowing these things to happen?

Indeed, the things that have happened to us often suggest that the real script of the play we're all living in is "God is indifferent" rather than "God is love." Deep down in our heart, in the place where the story is formed, this experience of God as indifferent drives us to write our own scripts. Job apparently lived with this anxiety about God even before his tribulations descended upon him, as evidenced by his exclamation from the ashes of his home and his life: "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me" (**Job 3:25**) (p.49-50)...

The cultures in the cradle of civilization lived with a pantheon of gods who themselves existed in a kind of hierarchy. There were gods of war, fertility, and harvest who were acknowledged by the culture as a whole, and under these, a litany of household gods, usually statues made of crafted wood, clay, and precious metals, that were placed on the family mantel. People related to each of these gods by means of specific rituals and

ceremonies whereby their protection and favor could be gained. Each family literally "owned" their own god.

To use an illustration from our culture, these household gods were somewhat like having a mobster for a neighbor. To those outside the neighborhood, the mobster may seem fearful and somewhat sinister. But if you're his immediate neighbor and treat him with deference and respect, he may get you a good deal on aluminum siding or a new car. Or he might have a bag of dead cats deposited on the doorstep of the man down the street, who, you casually mentioned, was allowing his dog to dig in your flower beds.

When the living God of the Old Testament came along, he seemed to fit right in with this way of thinking, describing himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He gave Moses a regimen of laws, rituals, and ceremonies to be followed if the Israelites were to gain his favor. Everything should have worked out fine. The familiar household-god religion was very simple and well understood by everyone: Simply obey the prescribed rules, regulations, and rituals that the god thought were important, for whatever reason, and he would be appeased and give his blessing. The Israelites never bothered to read between the lines. They were totally unprepared and unwilling to consider the thought that they, like Job, were involved in a much bigger drama.

Indeed, when we consider how central a part Job was given in the drama God was directing, we are confronted with the reality that we, too, could be in the same position. It seems that the part God has written for us is much too big and certainly too dangerous. Paul confirms this thought in Ephesians when he tells us, "The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence" (**Ephesians 1:22-23, the Message**). Every human being is of great significance to God, but those whom God has drawn to believe in him are center stage in a drama of cosmic proportions.

When we look at Job's time on center stage, we find that God not only allows the Prince of Darkness to come before his throne, he points Job out to him and, in effect, unleashes him on the defenseless man. This is very much akin to a policeman drawing the attention of a gang of thugs to a young man walking lawfully along the street with his wife, children, and belongings. He then gives the gangsters permission to test the man's respect for the law by mugging and robbing him, and killing his children. I find myself asking, "Was this really necessary to test Job's heart? What's going on here anyway?" I want to ask, "If God is the author, producer, and director of this play, what kind of a story is He telling?"

I am filled with not a little outrage as well as an anxiety that wants to ask for a much smaller part in the play than Job had; or possibly even a role in a more off-Broadway production that I could help direct. You know, something like *God Helps Brent Pursue Money, Wealth, and Fame While Living a Quiet Life*. There is something frightening about being in a play in which the director may allow the plot to descend on my character from a totally unknown direction, a direction that may cause me deep emotional or even physical harm. It is something like having the stage lights dropped from high overhead during one of my scenes without telling me, leaving me no chance to change my mark before they fall.

God's artistry as Playwright of the story we find ourselves living in often seems to use up characters like trailer courts in tornado season. He assures us, notably in the Psalms, that He sees our pain and cares for us, and that our tormentors will be judged, but He still calls us firmly to our marks, regardless of disease, calamity, age, sex, or strength.

He comes to Job in the midst of his loss, pain, and indeed the nearness of death and says, referring to the ongoing discussion between Job and his friends, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (**Job 38:2-3**). This is followed by his lengthy interrogation of Job's understanding of even the physical creation, much less any more profound issues. I must admit there is something in me as a man that feels strangely respected by this approach while another part of me thinks how unfeeling and cold.

When God comes to call Jeremiah to be his prophet of hard sayings to Judah, Jeremiah protests, saying, "Ah, Sovereign LORD...I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.' But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the LORD" (**Jeremiah 1:6-8**).

God is saying that these things will be done through Jeremiah's dependence on His strength and provision, and that He will rescue Him. Yet there is something about God's rescues that make them a little less timely than dialing 911. He leaves Abraham with his knife raised and ready to plunge into Isaac's heart, and Isaac waiting for the knife to descend; he leaves Joseph languishing for years in an Egyptian prison; he allows the Israelites to suffer four hundred years of bondage under the Egyptians and leaves those same Israelites backed against the Red Sea with Pharaoh's chariots thundering down on them.

He abandons Jesus to the cross and does not rescue Him at all. And then there are those of us who, along with the saints under heaven's very altar, are groaning under the weight of things gone wrong, waiting for that same Jesus to return and sweep us up with Him in power and glory. "How long, O Lord?" we whisper in our weariness and pain. Indeed, God calls us to battles where the deck appears stacked in favor of those who are his enemies and ours, just to increase the drama of the play. And there is the clear picture, even from God himself, that he does so to enhance his own glory (p.52-55)...

We would like to picture goodness as being synonymous with safety. When we think of God being good, we perhaps picture someone like Al on the popular TV program, Home Improvement. He is someone who carefully plans out each task ahead of time and has all the proper tools and safety equipment in place; someone who has thought out every possible danger ahead of time and made allowances to ensure our safety as his workmate; someone who goes to bed early, gets plenty of rest, and wears flannel shirts as a mark of his reliability.

God's Goodness is Not Synonymous With Comfort and Safety

Being in partnership with God, though, often feels much more like being Mel Gibson's sidekick in the movie Lethal Weapon. In his determination to deal with the bad guy, he leaps from seventh-story balconies into swimming pools, surprised that we would have any hesitation in following after him. Like Indiana Jones' love interests in the movies, we find ourselves caught up in an adventure of heroic proportions with a God who both seduces us with his boldness and energy and repels us with His willingness to place us in mortal danger, suspended over pits of snakes...

Indeed, one of Satan's most powerful whisperings to us is that we are expendable. We may admit that we are part of God's plan for His own glory but only in the same way Napoleon used his soldiers to establish his empire. When the going got rough in the Russian winter campaign, Napoleon hightailed it back to Paris in his carriage, leaving Marshall Ney and the remnants of the once Grand Army to make it back the best way they could. At one point in the long, arduous campaign of delivering to Judah the bad news of coming judgment and futile calls for repentance, Jeremiah explodes with thoughts that have apparently been building in him for a while with regard to God's use of him:

"O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (**Jeremiah 20:7-9 NIV**).

Jeremiah complains that not only has God written a play that casts him in a devastating role, but that he has also placed a fire in his heart that will not let him leave the play even if he wants to. And there is this fire in all of us, felt as a desire for intimacy and a hunger for meaning, that we must literally kill if we want to escape the play.

To all of these charges, God is unrepentant, even as he was with Job. His response to these things is basically along the lines of, "I am who I am, I do what I do. I am good. What are you going to do with me?" Ironically, at the end of his interrogation by God, Job picks himself up and repents. He goes away with a sense of "Oh, now I get it. I was foolish to have lost perspective." God turns to Job's friends, who have been expounding the standard household-god formula to Job, "If you don't sin, things will go well [i.e., you can control your destiny]" - and tells them quite plainly they know nothing about Him. He tells them He will have his friend Job pray for them (p.57-59)...

Genesis gives us an in-depth account of God using both crippling and blessing over the years of the patriarch Jacob's life to show him that his salvation and hope were in a more redemptive story than his own cleverness and manipulation could create; one that God was authoring. This is not the way we often see it, though. In our experience, it feels more as if God just allows bad things to happen to us out of indifference or malice. There is a fascinating illustration of a modern-day Jacob, a man trying to find redemption in a smaller story, along with God's fierce determination to disrupt and entice him back into the larger play, in the popular movie *Forrest Gump*.

Forrest is a likable man of borderline intelligence who grew up struggling with leg braces due to polio and all of the cruel tauntings that those who are different often suffer. He is thrown into seemingly random scenes in American history much like the white feather that drifts with the wind throughout the movie. He finds himself in Vietnam under the leadership of Lieutenant Dan, a rough but capable man, whose family has produced a long line of military heroes killed in combat. Lieutenant Dan is confident that dying with honor on the field of battle is his redemption. When he is rescued by *Forrest* from a firefight, his wounds require both legs to be amputated above the knee. He and *Forrest*, also wounded, are consigned to the same hospital ward where one night the rageful Lieutenant Dan drags *Forrest* from his bed. He proceeds to choke and curse him for destroying his life by saving him.

"I was supposed to die on the battlefield, Gump!" rages Lieutenant Dan. "I used to be Lieutenant Dan. Now look at me. I'm just a ... cripple."

In response, *Forrest* observes with poignant simplicity, "You still Lieutenant Dan," leaving him to collapse in grief and despair.

Lieutenant Dan, like all of us to one extent or another, is convinced that who he is, is inextricably tied to a self-redemptive story that alone will bring him recognition, honor, self respect - indeed, salvation. When that is taken from him, he is engulfed by shame, anger, and despair. He goes to New York City and enters into a purgatorial story of his own making, killing all desire for redemption. He lives off of his veteran's benefits in a haze of alcohol, drugs, and sex with prostitutes.

When *Forrest* comes to see him, Lieutenant Dan relates to him that some of the other veterans at the V.A. Hospital have been telling him he should trust in Jesus. "Can you believe it, Gump?" he remarks bitterly. "They tell me that Jesus will walk with me on the streets of heaven." But Lieutenant Dan can see no larger story than the one that has been stolen from him. He continues to pursue the destruction of his soul with the same zeal with which he once pursued glory on the battlefield.

On New Year's Eve, God the Wild One disrupts him again. Lieutenant Dan has corralled *Forrest* into going back to his apartment with two prostitutes to ring in the New Year with hedonistic disdain. The prostitutes play the game, each of them pretending great attraction to Lieutenant Dan and *Forrest*. When *Forrest* is uncomfortable with his "date's" advances, he clumsily resists. With the play she is acting out ruined, she spits out, "What's wrong with this retard?" and begins to berate *Forrest*.

And here, Lieutenant Dan finds out he has not been able to totally kill his heart. He is filled with rage at this treatment of *Forrest* and orders both of the women to leave, prompting a barrage of derogatory epithets from them as they exit. With his heart again exposed, he is brought to the realization that he still cares. And with this realization, he is plunged into

something beyond despair. The scene ends with a close-up of the death mask of his face stretched over a heart "filled" with inconsolable emptiness. But God is not through with Lieutenant Dan.

Forrest travels to the Gulf of Mexico to try his hand at captaining a shrimp boat, a plan inherited from his army buddy, Benjamin Blue, who was killed in the same firefight that took Lieutenant Dan's legs. Forrest is bringing his boat back to the dock one afternoon after another fruitless day casting for shrimp. On the dock, cigar clenched in his teeth, his wheelchair adorned with an "America - My Kind of Place" sticker is Lieutenant Dan, ready to try his hand as Forrest's first mate.

The strangeness of hope has once again provoked him to another try at self-redemption from his self-imposed hell. But once again, the Divine Disrupter thwarts his efforts. Lieutenant Dan confidently directs Forrest to where he is sure the shrimp are hiding, only to have their nets repeatedly regurgitate onto the deck a collage of old tires, license plates, leather shoes, and a clam or two. By this time, Lieutenant Dan is convinced that God is working against him somehow. He passively assents to Forrest's petitioning the Almighty for his favor as a member of the congregation of an otherwise all-black church. As Forrest sways disharmoniously with the other choir members and handles the praying, Lieutenant Dan sits in the rear of the church, violently downing whiskey and waiting for Forrest to appease this uncooperative household god that has attached himself to his life.

The ensuing days' shrimping brings no more harvest than before. With storm clouds gathering in the background, a completely frustrated and furious Lieutenant Dan rages, "Where ... is this God of yours, Gump? I wish your Jesus were here right now!" And Forrest comments to his listeners with rare irony, "It's funny Lieutenant Dan said that 'cause right then, God showed up." God sends a storm that puts the boat in mortal danger of being destroyed. Unbowed, Lieutenant Dan lashes himself to the mast, filled with joy at this opportunity to finally have it out with his tormenter. He curses God and dares him to sink the boat. But God has another purpose for Lieutenant Dan. He allows the storm to rage until his anger is spent but does not kill him. Later, we learn that Forrest and Lieutenant Dan's boat has been the only survivor in the entire shrimping fleet. As they once again ply the shrimping grounds, now without competition, their hoists and nets strain to release one cascading swarm of shrimp after another onto the deck of their boat.

As Forrest recounts the story of their becoming millionaires to a credulous but kind lady at a bus stop, he asks if she would like to know what happened to Lieutenant Dan. As he describes the scene to her, we see Lieutenant Dan sitting on the rail of their shrimping boat. The anger and fear so long entrenched there are gone. In their place is a kind of reflective surprise, like that of a man who has been redeemed in a most unexpected way. "Forrest," says Lieutenant Dan in a quiet, almost shy voice, "I never thanked you for saving my life." And with that, he hoists his legless body over the side. As Forrest hurries to the rail with some concern over his intentions, we see Lieutenant Dan backstroking peacefully through the water with a gentle smile on his face. As the camera moves away, we leave him swimming up the reflected gold highway of the sunset on the water, even as Forrest remarks, "I think Lieutenant Dan finally made his peace with God."

And again, we wonder. What is it that Lieutenant Dan has discovered? What healing has he received even though his legs are unrestored? So often, like Lieutenant Dan before his healing, we feel that God is not only unconcerned with our plight, but that he is actually working against us. And sometimes, we are right. The story of Lieutenant Dan is a poignant and revealing portrayal of God's fierce intentions to use both crippling and blessing to redeem us from our self-redemptive and purgatorial stories.

Indeed, in the seventeenth chapter of Acts, Paul gives the Athenians the stunning news that every single thing in the lives of both nations and individuals is orchestrated with this sole objective that they might seek God (**Acts 26-28**). This revelation requires some reflection. We are used to thinking of the great movements of history, even the movements in our immediate relationships, as being impersonal, if not arbitrary. But with God, who notes the fall of every sparrow, the events of our lives are thoughtfully and thoroughly orchestrated to

bring about our redemption. The days of our lives were ordered and numbered before there was one of them, says the psalmist (**Psalm 139:16**). And yet, the ways of his redemption often leave us trembling and fearful (p.62-66)...

"Do you really care for me, God?" Can we trust this stranger who leaps out upon us? Could it be that his glory and our well-being, really are part of the same script? If only we understood his heart more clearly...

Can it possibly get any more uncertain than this? We so long for life to be better than it is. We wish the beauty and love and adventure would stay and that someone strong and kind would show us how to make the Arrows go away. We hope that God will be our hero. Of all the people in the universe, He could stop the Arrows and arrange for just a little more blessing in our lives. He can spin the earth, change the weather, topple governments, obliterate armies, and resurrect the dead. Is it too much to ask that he intervene in our story? But He often seems aloof, almost indifferent to our plight, so entirely out of our control. Would it be any worse if there were no God? If He didn't exist, at least we wouldn't get our hopes up. We could settle once and for all that we really are alone in the universe and get on with surviving as best we may.

This is, in fact, how many professing Christians end up living: as practical agnostics. Perhaps God will come through, perhaps he won't, so I'll be hanged if I'll live as though He had to come through. I'll hedge my bets and if He does show up, so much the better. The simple word for this is godlessness. Like a lover who's been wronged, we guard our heart against future disappointment...

As I spoke with a friend about her painful life, how reckless and unpredictable God seems, she turned and with pleading eyes asked the question we are all asking somewhere deep within: "How can I trust a lover who is so wild?" Indeed, how do we not only trust him, but love him in return? There's only one possible answer: You could love Him if you knew his heart was good. In the movie "The Last of the Mohicans" brave Nathaniel has captured the heart of the beautiful Cora. With tremendous courage and cunning, he rescues her from an ambush set by the black-hearted Magua, leader of a warring tribe. Nathaniel leads Cora, her sister, and a few other survivors to a hidden cave behind a waterfall. Just when it appears they will escape and live happily ever after, Magua and his savages discover their hideout. Once captured, the women may be spared but the men will surely be executed. With no powder for their rifles, Nathaniel's only chance is to leap from the falls; by saving himself, he will live to rescue Cora another day. One of the other men calls him a coward, accusing him of foul and selfish motives. How is Cora feeling? What looks like abandonment may not be. Her only hope in the face of such wildness lies in the goodness of Nathaniel's heart. At this point, it's all she has to go on. It's all we often have to go on too.

Does God have a good heart? In the last chapter Brent spoke of God as the Author of the story, which is how most people see him if they see him at all. And, as Hamlet said, there's the rub. When we think of God as Author, the Grand Chess Player, the Mind Behind It All, we doubt his heart (p.67-71)...

God's Story Shows His Heart Really is Good

The Scriptures are written from the perspective that God is the hero of the story. Let's revisit the drama with the view of God as lead actor. What is His motive? How does life affect Him?

Act I: His Eternal Heart

All good fairy tales begin with "Once upon a time," and so it is with the truest fairy tale of all. In the beginning, which is to say, once upon a time, is used twice in the Scriptures. There is the first verse of Genesis, of course, but we cannot start there because when the curtain goes up on **Genesis chapter 1**, it is, actually going up on later events, the human story.

We're after God's story, the drama from His perspective, so we would do better to start with the opening lines from the gospel of John, which take us back even farther to the once upon

a time before time: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (**John 1:1**).

The story that is the Sacred Romance begins not with God alone, the Author at his desk, but God in relationship, intimacy beyond our wildest imagination, heroic intimacy... Think of your best moments of love or friendship or creative partnership, the best times with family or friends around the dinner table, your richest conversations, the acts of simple kindness that sometimes seem like the only things that make life worth living. Like the shimmer of sunlight on a lake, these are reflections of the love that flows [between God the Father and His Son]. We long for intimacy because we are made in the image of perfect intimacy. Still, what we don't have and may never have known is often a more powerful reminder of what ought to be. Our story begins with the hero in love. As Buechner reminds us, "God does not need the Creation in order to have something to love because within himself love happens."

And yet, what kind of love? There are selfish forms of love, relationships that create closed systems, impenetrable to outsiders. Real love creates a generous openness. Have you ever been so caught up in something that you just had to share it? When you are walking alone in the woods, something takes your breath away - a sunset, a waterfall, the simple song of a bird - and you think, "If only my beloved were here." The best things in life were meant to be shared. That is why married lovers want to increase their joy by having children. And so it is with God. "Father," Jesus says, "I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am. I want them to be one heart and mind with us" (John 17). Overflowing with the generosity that comes from the abundance of real love, He creates us to share in the joy of this heroic intimacy...

Act II: His Heart Betrayed

There was another scene before ours. In Act II, there came angels. We're not given a great deal of insight into the life of angels, but we do know that God opened His heart and home to a heavenly host before us. And for the most part, they seem thrilled to be a part of things. Scripture never shows us a bored angel. Quite the contrary. We also know there was a cosmic divorce, a betrayal in the heart of the universe. Satan, then named Lucifer, turned on his Maker. He rose up against his sovereign Lord, and with him legions upon legions of angels. There was war in heaven...Believing that he should have center stage, Satan draws a multitude of angels into battle against the throne of God...

Satan mounted his rebellion through the power of one idea: God doesn't have a good heart. Though it seems almost incomprehensible, he deceived a multitude of the heavenly host by sowing the seed of doubt in their minds that God was somehow holding out on them. After the insurrection is squelched, that question lingers in the universe like smoke from a forest fire. Sure, God won, but it took force to do it. Power isn't the same thing as goodness. As the lead actor in the story, God seems generous and self-giving, but perhaps He's just big. Maybe His motive is simply to be in charge. At the end of Act II, our hero's heart has been called into question.

Act III: His Heart on Trial

When the curtain goes up on the story of humanity, we see God in a flurry of breathtaking dramatic actions that we rather blandly call "creation." Remember, we're looking for the motives of His heart. Why is He doing all this? We know he already had the perfect relationship and that He has suffered a betrayal in the heart of heaven simply for the offense of sharing it. Now we see Him preparing to woo our hearts with a world that is beautiful and funny and full of adventure. Don't rush ahead to the Fall. Stay here a moment and feel God's happiness with it all. Yosemite and Yellowstone and Maui and the Alps; mangoes and blackberries and cabernet grapes; horses and hummingbirds and rainbow trout. "The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (**Job 38:7 NIV**).

God creates man and woman and sets them in Paradise. How long had He been planning this? Are we merely the replacement for the angels He lost, the first date He can find on the rebound. The first chapter of Ephesians gives a look into God's motives here:

“Long before he laid down earth's foundations, He had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of His love, to be made whole and holy by His love. Long, long ago He decided to adopt us into His family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure He took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of His lavish giftgiving by the hand of His beloved Son.... Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, He had His eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living” (The Message).

God begins our courtship with a surprise. Taking the blindfold off, He turns us around and reveals His handmade wedding present. "Here," He says. "It's yours. Enjoy yourselves. Do you like it? Take it for a spin." A lavish gift indeed. What's He up to? Flowers, chocolates, exotic vacations, dinners at the finest restaurants - any person would feel pursued. But what are His intentions? Surprisingly, we see in the first glimpse of God's wildness the goodness of His heart - He gives us our freedom. In order for a true romance to occur, we had to be free to reject Him. In Disappointment with God, Philip Yancey reminds us that the powers of the Author aren't sufficient to win our hearts.

“Power can do everything but the most important thing: it cannot control love...In a concentration camp, the guards possess almost unlimited power. By applying force, they can make you renounce your God, curse your family, work without pay, eat human excrement, kill. and then bury your closest friend or even your own mother. All this is within their power. Only one thing is not: they cannot force you to love them. This fact may help explain why God sometimes seems shy to use His power. He created us to love him, but His most impressive displays of miracle - the kind we may secretly long for - do nothing to foster that love. As Douglas John Hall has put it, 'God's problem is not that God is not able to do certain things. God's problem is that God loves. Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life.'”

The wildness of giving us freedom is even more staggering when we remember that God has already paid dearly for giving freedom to the angels. But because of His grand heart He goes ahead and takes the risk, an enormous, colossal risk. The reason he didn't make puppets is because he wanted lovers. Remember, he's inviting us up into a romance. Freedom is part of the explanation for the problem of evil. God is the author of some storms directly; but he is the author of the possibility of all storms in giving us freedom. And we opened Pandora's box.

Can you imagine if on your honeymoon one of you sneaked off for a rendezvous with a perfect stranger? Adam and Eve kicked off the honeymoon by sleeping with the enemy. Then comes one of the most poignant verses in all Scripture. "What is this you have done?" (**Genesis 3:13**). You can almost hear the shock, the pain of betrayal in God's voice. The fall of Adam and Eve mustn't be pictured as a crime like theft, but as a betrayal of love. In love God creates us for love and we give Him the back of our hand. Why? Satan gets us to side with him by sowing the seed of doubt in our first parents' minds: "God's heart really isn't good. He's holding out on you. You've got to take things into your own hands." And Paradise was lost.

Yet there was something about the heart of God that the angels and our first parents had not yet seen. Here, at the lowest point in our relationship, God announces His intention never to abandon us but to seek us out and win us back. "I will come for you." Grace introduces a new element of God's heart. Up till this point we knew he was rich, famous, influential, even generous. Behind all that can still hide a heart that is less than good. Grace removes all doubt.

And then the long story of God's pursuit of humanity begins. Satan wanted center stage: He wanted to be the main character, he wanted to be the point. His plan now is to ruin the Sacred Romance, to get us all caught up in our own little sociodramas by telling us that we are the point.

You can see how humanity goes along with this. Cain murders Abel; Lamech threatens to murder everyone else. Humanity grows worse and worse until God says in pain, "I'm sorry I

ever made them." But He doesn't give up. First with Noah, then Abraham, then Israel, we see God pursuing a people whose hearts will be for Him, with whom He can share the joy of the larger story. But their faithfulness lasts about as long as the morning dew.

How is God feeling by this point? As a person in the story, what is his heart experience? When we reach the prophets, we get a glimpse at what it feels like to be God. Reading the prophets, says Yancey, is like hearing a lovers' quarrel through the apartment wall. Eavesdrop on the argument and catch a glimpse of his heart:

I long to be gracious to you. You are precious and honored in my sight, because I love you. But you-come here, you ... you ... offspring of adulterers. You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill, forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide. You have been false to me. Yet ... I will take delight in you, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will I rejoice over you. **(From Isaiah)**

I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me... What fault did you find in me that you strayed so far from me? You are a swift she-camel running here and there, sniffing the wind in her craving - in her heat who can restrain her? Should I not punish them for this? Should I not avenge myself? I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with lovingkindness. What have I done to make you hate me so much? **(From Jeremiah)**

I will answer you according to your idols [your false lovers] in order to recapture your heart. **(From Ezekiel)**

Return to me and I will return to you. Yet you have said harsh things about me. You have said, "There's no pay-off in this relationship. It's not worth loving God." **(From Malachi)**

After this, four hundred years of silence. God doesn't call and when we do he won't answer the phone. You can almost imagine Him nursing His wounds, wondering where it all went wrong. And then...Here is Kierkegaard's version of the story:

"Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist - no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

"She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal" (as quoted in Disappointment with God).

The king clothes himself as a beggar and renounces his throne in order to win her hand. The Incarnation, the life and the death of Jesus, answers once and for all the question, "What is God's heart toward me?" This is why Paul says in **Romans 5**, "Look here, at the Cross. Here is the demonstration of God's heart. At the point of our deepest betrayal, when we had run our farthest from him and gotten so lost in the woods we could never find our way home, God came and died to rescue us." We don't have to wait for the Incarnation to see God as a character in the story and learn something of His motives. But after the Incarnation there can be no doubt.

There is so much more to say. Jesus left to prepare our place in heaven; the Spirit has come to empower us to continue the invasion of the kingdom, which is primarily about freeing the hearts of others to live in the love of God. There is so much in our own heart that remains to

be released. Our enemy has not given up yet and his target is also our heart. And what of Act IV, the coming adventures of heaven? All that is for the chapters ahead. Let's stop here and try to bring this into focus.

What is God like? Is His heart good? We know He is the initiator from first to last. As Simon Tugwell reminds, God is the one pursuing us:

"So long as we imagine that it is we who have to look for God, we must often lose heart. But it is the other way about; He is looking for us. And so we can afford to recognize that very often we are not looking for God; far from it, we are in full flight from him, in high rebellion against him. And He knows that and has taken it into account. He has followed us into our own darkness; there where we thought finally to escape him, we run straight into his arms. So we do not have to erect a false piety for ourselves, to give us the hope of salvation. Our hope is in his determination to save us, and he will not give in." (Prayer)

When we feel that life is finally up to us it becomes suffocating. When we are the main character, the world is so small there's barely room to move. It frees our souls to have something going on before us that involves us, had us in mind, yet doesn't depend on us or culminate in us, but invites us up into something larger. And what about the Romance and the Arrows? It wasn't supposed to be like this. Once upon a time we lived in a garden; we lived in the place for which we were made. There were no Arrows, only beauty. Our relationships weren't tainted with fear, guardedness, manipulation, quid pro quo. Our work was rewarding; we received more than we gave. There is beauty, and we so long for it to last; we were made for the Garden. But now there is affliction also, and that is because we live East of Eden. The Arrows seem like the truest part of life, but they are not. The heart of the universe is still perfect love.

Finally, if we try to relate to God primarily as Author, we will go mad or despair - pretty much the same thing. I just can't imagine the characters of a novel affecting the author that much. He may like them, hate them, be intrigued with mapping out their development, but they don't impact him the way the people in his real life do. He doesn't live with them as flesh-and-blood lovers. But when we see God as the Hero of the story and consider what He wants for us, we know one thing for certain: We affect Him...It is only when we see God as the Hero...that we come to know His heart is good.

Where does that leave us? What is our role in the cosmic drama? Are we bit players, added for dramatic tension, color, comic relief? Neil Anderson has written that while "The most important belief we possess is true knowledge of who God is....The second most important belief is who we are as children of God"...

We Are His Beloved – His Lover

Helen of Troy must have really been something. Two kingdoms went to war over her; thousands of men gave up their lives so that one might have her. Hers was "the face that launched a thousand ships." Helen was the wife of Menelaus, King of Greece, in the ninth century, B.C. Their home was a peaceful Mediterranean kingdom until the arrival of Paris, Prince of Troy. Paris fell in love with Helen and, depending on the version of the story you've heard, she with him. Under the cover of night, Paris stole away with Helen and took her back to Troy. It was the beginning of the Trojan War. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon amassed a mighty Greek army and set off in one thousand ships to lay siege on Troy, all to win Helen back.

Few have ever felt so pursued. Sometimes we wonder if we've even been noticed. Father was too busy to come to our games, or perhaps he jumped ship altogether. Mother was lost in a never-ending pile of laundry or, more recently, in her own career. We come into the world longing to be special to someone and from the start we are disappointed. It is a rare soul indeed who has been sought after for who she is - not because of what she can do, or what others can gain from her, but simply for herself (p.72-84)...

The gospel says that we, who are God's beloved, created a cosmic crisis. It says we, too, were stolen from our True Love and that He launched the greatest campaign in the history of the world to get us back. God created us for intimacy with Him. When we turned our back on him He promised to come for us. He sent personal messengers; He used beauty and affliction to recapture our hearts. After all else failed, He conceived the most daring of plans. Under the cover of night he stole into the enemy's camp incognito, the Ancient of Days disguised as a newborn.

The Incarnation, as Phil Yancey reminds us, was a daring raid into enemy territory. The whole world lay under the power of the evil one and we were held in the dungeons of darkness. God risked it all to rescue us. Why? What is it that He sees in us that causes Him to act the jealous lover, to lay siege both on the kingdom of darkness and on our own idolatries as if on Troy (not to annihilate, but to win us once again for Himself). This fierce intention, this reckless ambition that shoves all conventions aside, willing literally to move heaven and earth. What does he want from us?

We've been offered many explanations. From one religious camp we're told that what God wants is obedience, or sacrifice, or adherence to the right doctrines, or morality. Those are the answers offered by conservative churches. The more therapeutic churches suggest that no, God is after our contentment, or happiness, or self-actualization, or something else along those lines. He is concerned about all these things, of course, but they are not His primary concern. What He is after is us - our laughter, our tears, our dreams, our fears, our heart of hearts. Remember His lament in Isaiah, that though His people were performing all their duties, "their hearts are far from me" (**Isaiah 29:13**). How few of us truly believe this. We've never been wanted for our heart, our truest self, not really, not for long. The thought that God wants our heart seems too good to be true (p.91)...

Every woman is in some way searching for or running from her beauty and every man is looking for or avoiding his strength. Why? In some deep place within, we remember what we were made to be, we carry with us the memory of gods, image-bearers walking in the Garden. So why do we flee our essence? As hard as it may be for us to see our sin, it is far harder still for us to remember our glory. The pain of the memory of our former glory is so excruciating, we would rather stay in the pigsty than return to our true home. We are like Gomer, wife of the prophet Hosea, who preferred to live in an adulterous affair rather than be restored to her true love.

Like Helen, we participated in our capture, though we were duped into it. And like Helen, our king has come for us, in spite of our unfaithfulness. If it is true that our identity comes from the impact we have on others, then our deepest and truest identity comes from the impact we've had on our most significant Other. Listen to the names He has given us: "No longer will they call you Deserted...They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After" (**Isaiah 62:4, 12**).

In other words, we are the ones to be called Fought Over, Captured and Rescued, Pursued. It seems remarkable, incredible, too good to be true. There really is something desirable within me, something the King of the universe has moved heaven and earth to get...

The Scriptures employ a wide scale of metaphors to capture the many facets of our relationship with God. If you consider them in a sort of ascending order, there is a noticeable and breathtaking progression. Down near the bottom of the totem pole we are the clay and He the Potter. Moving up a notch, we are the sheep and He the Shepherd, which is a little better position on the food chain but hardly flattering; sheep don't have a reputation as the most graceful and intelligent creatures in the world. Moving upward, we are the servants of the Master, which at least lets us into the house, even if we have to wipe our feet, watch our manners, and not talk too much. Most Christians never get past this point, but the ladder of metaphors is about to make a swift ascent.

God also calls us his children and himself our heavenly Father, which brings us into the possibility of real intimacy - love is not one of the things a vase and its craftsman share together, nor does a sheep truly know the heart of the shepherd, though it may enjoy the

fruits of his kindness. Still, there is something missing even in the best parent-child relationship. Friendship levels the playing field in a way family never can, at least not until the kids have grown and left the house. Friendship opens a level of communion that a five-year old doesn't know with his mother and father. And "friends" are what He calls us.

But there is still a higher and deeper level of intimacy and partnership awaiting us at the top of this metaphorical ascent. We are lovers. The courtship that began with a honeymoon in the Garden culminates in the wedding feast of the Lamb. "I will take delight in you," He says to us, "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will I rejoice over you," so that we might say in return, "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me"...

The bridal imagery often fails to capture a man's heart, but consider: God is neither male nor female. Both genders together are needed to reflect His image and He transcends them both. The question every woman is asking goes something like, "Am I lovely? Do you want me?" The question every man is asking is, "Do I have what it takes? Am I adequate?" As men and women, we want to be chosen for different reasons, but we both want to be chosen, to be welcomed into the heart of things, invited into the Drama to live from our heart. We both want love, the adventure of intimacy, and this is what God's pursuit means for men and for women.

Our romance is far more ancient than the story of Helen of Troy. God has had us in mind since before the Foundations of the World He loved us before the beginning of time, has come for us, and now calls Us to journey toward Him, with Him, for the consummation of our love (p.95-97)...

Our enemy is the angel Lucifer, son of the morning, one of the first and highest angels God created. He is the antagonist in the sacred romance - the great villain. All other villains are only a shadow of him. He is the one God gave a place of honor and trust "among the fiery stones" of the courts of heaven and who sees God face-to-face even to this day. He is one who spurned God's love and lost everything good through the sin of presumption. His desire was, and still is, to possess everything that belongs to God, including the worship of all those whom God loves. And God, as the Author of the great Story in which we are all living, has mysteriously allowed him a certain freedom to harass and oppress the other characters in the play, sometimes in a severe manner (p.101)...

Satan's seduction of our heart always comes in the form of a story that offers us greater control through knowing good and evil rather than the unknowns of relationship...God's intention, on the other hand, is to use spiritual warfare to draw us into deeper communion with himself. Satan's device is to isolate us and wear us out obsessing about what he has done and what he will do next. And he is very effective in using our particular Message of the Arrows to do it. God desires to use the enemy's attacks to remove the obstacles between ourselves and him, to reestablish our dependency on him as his sons and daughters in a much deeper way. Once we understand that, the warfare we are in begins to feel totally different. It is not really even about Satan anymore, but about communion with God and abiding in Jesus as the source of life. The whole experience begins to feel more like a devotional (p.111, 120)...

God is saying, "I love you and yet you betray me at the drop of a hat. I feel so much pain. Can't you see we're made for each other? I want you to come back to me." And Israel's answer, like that of any addict or adulterer, is: "It's no use! / I love foreign gods, / and I must go after them" (**Jeremiah 2:25**).

Perhaps we can empathize with the ache God experienced as Israel's "husband" (and ours when we are living indulgently). Having raised Israel from childhood to a woman of grace and beauty, He astonishingly cannot win her heart from her adulterous lovers. The living God of the universe cannot win the only one He loves, not due to any lack on his part, but because her heart is captured by her addictions, which is to say, her adulterous lovers.

Many of us have had the experience of not being able to bridge the distance between ourselves and others, whether they be parents, friends, or lovers. Whether the distance is

caused by unhealed wounds or willful sin in our lover's heart - or our own - we experience their rejection as our not "being enough" to win them. Unlike God, we begin to think of ourselves as having a problem with self-esteem.

Whereas God became even more wild in His love for us by sending Jesus to die for our freedom, most of us choose to both become and take on lovers that are less wild. We give up desiring to be in a relationship of heroic proportions, where we risk rejection, and settle for being heroes and heroines in the smaller stories where we have learned we can "turn someone on" through our usefulness, cleverness, or beauty (or at least turn ourselves on with a momentary taste of transcendence).

The list of our adulterous indulgences is endless: There is the exotic dancer, the religious fanatic, the alcoholic, the adrenaline freak, the prostitute with a man, the man with a prostitute, the eloquent pastor who seduces with his words, and the woman who seduces with her body. There is the indulgent lover who never really indulges physically, but spends his life in a kind of whimsy about what is lost, like Ashley in *Gone with the Wind*. What these indulgent lovers have in common is the pursuit of transcendence through some gratification that is under their control.

In the religions of the Fertile Crescent, access to God (transcendence) was attempted through sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes. Perhaps, as we indulge our addictions, we are doing no less than prostituting ourselves and others in this very same way. "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God," said G. K. Chesterton.

At first glance, those of us who live by indulgence - illicit affairs of the heart - appear to have a certain passion that is superior to those who live by anesthesia. But it is a passion that must be fed by the worship or use of the other and so it is a passion that does not leave us free to love. Indulgence leaves us empty and primed for the next round of thirst quenching in an endless cycle that Solomon described as "vanity of vanities"...

It is desire that is meant to lead us to nothing less than communion with Him. If we try to anesthetize it, we become relational islands, unavailable to those who need us; like the father who lowers his newspaper with annoyance at the family chaos going on around him, but makes no move to speak his life into it.

If we try to gain transcendence through indulgence, soon enough familiarity breeds contempt and we are driven to search for mystery elsewhere. So the man having an affair must have another and the man who is an alcoholic must drink more and more to find the window of feeling good. "There is only One Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ," said Oswald Chambers (p.134-136)...

Seeing Life in the Light of God's Goodness and His Pursuit of Us

Every great story involves a quest...Abraham left "his country, his people and his father's household" to follow the most outlandish sort of promise from a God He'd only just met, and He never came back. Jacob and his sons went to Egypt for some groceries and four hundred years later the Israel nation pulled up stakes and headed for home. Peter, Andrew, James, and John all turned on a dime one day to follow the Master, their fishing nets heaped in wet piles behind them. The Sacred Romance involves for every soul a journey of heroic proportions. And while it may require for some a change of geography, for every soul it means a journey of the heart...

We've met the main players in the Sacred Romance and gotten to know something of their true identities, their motives, and their roles in the story. Let's come back now to the daily grind of our own experience to answer the question, "What does all this look like in real life?"

How is God wooing us through flat tires, bounced checks, and rained-out picnics? What is He after as we face cancer, sexual struggles, and abandonment? Does knowing that we are His Beloved make any difference at all? Would recognizing Satan's temptations and our less-wild lovers help us to live as freer men and women? What difference does all this make,

anyhow? The short answer is, it gives us a way of seeing that reveals life for the romantic journey it truly is.

Entering into the Sacred Romance begins with eyes to see and ears to hear. Where would we be today if Eve had looked at the serpent with different eyes, if she had seen at once that the beautiful creature with the charming voice and the reasonable proposition was in fact a fallen angel bent on the annihilation of the human race? Failure to see things as they truly are resulted in unspeakable tragedy. From that point on, the theme of blindness runs throughout Scripture. It's not merely a matter of failing to recognize temptation when we meet it; like Elisha's servant, we often fail to see the drama of redemption as well. As prophet to Israel, Elisha proved to be a major military liability for the Aramaeans. Every time these enemies of Israel planned an ambush, the man of God spoiled their fun by betraying their position to the otherwise unsuspecting people of God. Furious, the king of Aram decided to take out Israel's "radar" by killing Elisha. He learned where the prophet was holed up and sent an army to surround the city. The drama unfolds through the eyes of Elisha's servant:

"When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked.

"Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.'

"And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.'

"Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" **(2 Kings 6:15-17).**

Needless to say, Elisha's servant suddenly saw from a whole different perspective. I think it's safe to assume he also experienced a bit of emotional relief - a recovery of heart. What for him had undoubtedly been a harrowing encounter became an exciting adventure.

The apostle Paul experienced an even greater surprise on the road to Damascus. Thinking he was doing God a favor, he was hell-bent on crushing a tiny religious movement called the Way. But he had the plot and the characters completely confused. Paul, known at that time as Saul, was playing the role of Defender of the Faith, when in fact he was Persecutor of Christ. It took a bout of blindness to bring things into focus, and when the scales fell from his eyes he never saw things the same way again. Paul later explained to the Romans that human sin and suffering are the result of foolish and darkened hearts, brought on by a refusal to see the Sacred Romance. It should come as no surprise that his most fervent prayer for the saints was that the scales would fall from the eyes of our heart so that we might not miss the Sacred Romance **(Ephesians 1:18-19).**

Several years ago I went through one of the most painful trials of my professional life. The story involves a colleague whom I will call Dave, a man I hired and with whom I had labored several years in ministry. We spent many hours on the road together, speaking to churches about the Christian life. A point came when I needed to confront Dave about some issues in his life that were hurting his own ministry and the larger purposes of our team. In all fairness, I think I handled it poorly, but I was totally unprepared for what happened next.

Dave turned on me with the ferocity of a cornered animal. He fabricated lies and spread rumors in an attempt to destroy my career. His actions were so out of proportion it was hard to believe we were reacting to the same events. He went to the head pastor in an attempt to have me dismissed. The attempt failed, but our friendship was lost and several others were hurt in the process.

In the midst of the crisis, I spoke with Brent one afternoon about the turn of events and the awful pain of betrayal. He said "I wonder what God is up to in all this?"

"God?" I said. "What's He got to do with it?" My practical agnosticism was revealed. I was caught up in the sociodrama, the smaller story, completely blind to the true story at that point in my life.

Brent's question arrested my attention and brought it to a higher level. In fact, the process of our sanctification, our journey, rests entirely on our ability to see life from the basis of that question. As the poet William Blake warned long ago, "Life's dim window of the soul distorts the heavens from pole to pole, and leads you to believe a lie, when you see with, not through, the eye."

Allow me, then, to review what we have encountered. First, our lives are not a random series of events; they tell a Story that has meaning. We aren't in a movie we've arrived at twenty minutes late; we are in a Sacred Romance. There really is something wonderful that draws our heart; we are being wooed. But there is also something fearful. We face an enemy with vile intentions. Is anyone in charge? Someone strong and kind who notices us? At some point we have all answered that question "no" and gone on to live in a smaller story. But the answer is "yes" - there is someone strong and kind who notices us. Our Story is written by God who is more than author, He is the romantic lead in our personal dramas. He created us for Himself and now He is moving heaven and earth to restore us to His side. His wooing seems wild because He seeks to free our heart from the attachments and addictions we've chosen thanks to the Arrows we've known.

And we - who are we, really? We are not pond scum, nor are we the lead in the story. We are the Beloved; our hearts are the most important thing about us and our desire is wild because it is made for a wild God. We are the Beloved, and we are addicted. We've either given our heart to other lovers and can't get out of the relationships, or we've tried our best to kill desire (often with the help of others) and live lives of safe, orderly control. Either way, we play into the hands of the one who hates us. Satan is the mortal enemy of God and therefore ours as well. who comes with offers of less-wild lovers, hoping to deceive us in order to destroy our heart and thus prevent our salvation or cripple our sanctification. These are the stage, the characters, and the plot in the broadest possible terms. Where do we go from here?

We are faced with a decision that grows with urgency each passing day: Will we leave our small stories behind and venture forth to follow our Beloved into the Sacred Romance? The choice to become a pilgrim of the heart can happen any day and we can begin our journey from any place. We are here, the time is now, and the Romance is always unfolding. The choice before us is not to make it happen. As Chesterton said, "An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us. It is a thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose." Lucy wasn't looking for Narnia when she found it on the other side of the wardrobe; in a way, it found her. Abraham wasn't wandering about looking for the one true God; he showed up with an extraordinary invitation. But having had their encounters, both could have chosen otherwise. Lucy could have shut the wardrobe door and never mentioned what had happened there. Abraham could have opted for life in Haran. The choice before us is a choice to enter in.

So much of the journey forward involves a letting go of all that once brought us life. We turn away from the familiar abiding places of the heart, the false selves we have lived out, the strengths we have used to make a place for ourselves and all our false loves, and we venture forth in our hearts to trace the steps of the One who said, "Follow me"...

The Dragons and Nits of Life

Pretending that life is easier and more blessed than it really is hinders our ability to walk with God and share Him with others. Faith is not the same thing as denial. Blessings come, to be sure. But they tend to be infrequent, unpredictable, and transient.

In the day-to-day pattern of things, our journey is shaped more often by dragons and nits - crises that shake us to the core and persistent troubles that threaten to nag us to death.

Dragons and nits: Are they tragic events and random inconveniences, or are they part of the plot through which God redeems our heart in very personal ways?

Mary is a good friend of mine who lost her permanent front teeth through an accident in early adolescence. Years later, she struggled to finally resolve the issue with dental caps. What should have been a simple procedure took weeks, then months. Appointment after appointment, the caps were either the wrong color, the wrong shape, or the wrong size. When she finally did get a pair that she could live with, the glue didn't hold.

Where was the Sacred Romance in such a mundane and yet withering struggle? Why didn't God ride in as hero and provide a beautiful set of caps? Wouldn't that have been the loving thing to do? As the ordeal continued, a major issue of her heart surfaced. Mary's teeth had long been for her a symbol of her struggle with the question of her inner beauty. Her teeth were a source of shameful arrows lodged deep. A seemingly irrelevant nit that God refused to take away became an opportunity to face a fundamental question the heart of every woman asks: Am I lovely? Without the nit, the deeper issue of her heart would never have come up. Once it did, the real battle began.

The Accuser stepped in with a subtle, deadly stream of thoughts: "Look, just settle for the wrong caps and get on with your life. Your desire for beauty is nothing more than vanity. Things will never change. God doesn't care for your heart or He would have taken care of your teeth." And finally, "This is who you really are: unlovely and unlovable."

Each time Mary looked in the mirror, these sentences urged her to lose heart. Some days, the crisis felt as if it would crush her spirit; on other days, she just felt dumb. Meanwhile, Mary's false lovers took their cue and began offering to help her deal with the pain. Food promised to take away her heartache; busyness lured her to bury it beneath a deluge of Christian service. Even the faith practiced by the charismatic church she attends offered to lift her beyond the struggle if she would only focus on the Lord and worship more frequently.

Thankfully, her True Love was persistent in his pursuit of her heart, refusing to let her take the easy way out. The question of her inner beauty broke to the surface one day, and, fortunately, a friend with eyes for the Romance was there to help her see what was at stake.

Once Mary finally turned and faced the core issue, God was able to speak words of loving reassurance: "You are lovely, Mary, and I want you to offer your inner beauty, your womanly heart to the world." Through a seemingly insignificant and unspiritual issue like dental caps, God spoke healing to Mary's heart and invited her up into the Sacred Romance.

If we'll take time to reflect, the nits of our lives and the way we typically respond to them both have a theme, a pattern that reveals something important about our heart, something God is after. Mary's theme was the suppression of her beauty under more spiritual distractions." Satan tempts us toward cynicism, resignation, and an offer of a safer or even a more exciting life if we will simply renounce our True Love and follow him.

The dragons are far more dramatic. The doctor announces he's found a lump; your spouse announces she is no longer in love with you. They are dragons because they strike at the core of our deepest fears. This is the dark night of the soul, when we face the implications of Job's question: God could stop this. Why doesn't he? Satan leaps in with a reaffirmation of the first temptation: "God isn't really your kind advocate after all." We're faced with a choice to fall back, clutch up, seize control, or enter more deeply into our lives and our beliefs and release more thoroughly to the love of God.

"I'll never have the love I want." The sentence rose up from some deep place within me as I lay in bed one morning, looking for a reason to get up. My wife, Stasi, and I had been going through one of the hardest times we'd ever encountered in our marriage. Some days we both wondered if we would even make it; other days we wondered if we even wanted to. The wounds were too deep, the barriers too high; it just didn't seem worth the effort. Divorce seemed like a perfectly reasonable way out.

Beneath the anger and the disappointment lurked a far more defining issue of my heart. Years ago, when my father checked out of my life into alcoholism, an Arrow lodged deep within: You are on your own. In order to control that Arrow I made a resolution in my heart: I won't need anyone, not deeply. I can make it without love. But as the years rolled by, my heart refused to live in my self-created isolation. I looked for someone to fill the void in my life left by my father. I chose Stasi as the lucky girl. Beneath the stated marriage vows of "for better or for worse," what I was really saying was, "Stasi, I'm going to give you the opportunity of a lifetime. No one has ever really loved me the way I so desperately want to be loved, but I'm going to give you that chance. It lies in your power to validate my soul."

The pressure is more than any human being can bear. Even if she were a perfect woman, Stasi could never come through. But like all of us, she came into marriage with a set of demons all her own. Though she didn't face something as awful as alcoholism, her struggles seemed to me a terrible repeat of my father's because I felt the effect to be the same: I felt alone. Smelling blood, Satan closed in like a shark with suggestions like, "You don't have to put up with this, you know. There are options, other women. Besides, things will never change with Stasi." I turned to my false loves, losing myself in my career and spending my free time escaping through fly-fishing. I prayed that God would simply take away the trials in our marriage, but He didn't. I tried to live beyond my longing to be loved, but I couldn't. The stakes were incredibly high: a loss of heart, of our marriage, and the perpetuation of the family curse onto our boys.

There, in the wee hours of the morning, when our heart has the chance to catch us with its most honest thoughts, the sentence rose from the depths of my soul: I'll never have the love I want. The aching wound from years before was present to me again. And there God was able to begin to waken me to the Romance. Browsing through Scripture I read **1 John 4:7**, a simple sentence, one I had probably read a thousand times before: "Love comes from God." It brought more hope than I had ever known. It spoke to the wound because the wound was awakened and I was ready to hear. As the weeks progressed, I embraced my longing to be loved and turned the validation of my soul over to my Father in heaven. Sometime later, while on a business flight to the West Coast, I was thinking about love and those words from 1 John. A new sentence arose in my heart: I have the love I wanted all my life.

Both dragons and nits take us into the deep places of the soul, uncovering the sentences we have long lived by. It was in the depths of his personal tragedies that Job uttered the ruling sentence of his heart: "What I feared has come upon me" (**Job 3:25**). In other words, "I knew it! I knew I couldn't really trust God - not with the things that matter most." Job's idol was control and God was determined to save him from it. When the nits and dragons come, we ask God to remove them and when He doesn't, we take charge of our own well-being since it appears no one else will. The dragons and nits reveal to us (and to our community) where our attachments and addictions lie. In other words, they reveal where our heart is, other than captured by the love of God.

But there is more. Life on the road takes us into our heart, for only when we are present in the deep sentences can God speak to them. That's why the story is a journey; it has to be lived, it cannot simply be talked about. When we face trials, our most common reaction is to ask God, "Why won't you relieve us?" And when he doesn't, we resignedly ask, "What do you want me to do?" Now we have a new question: "Where is the Romance headed?"

There is another great "revealing" in our life on the road. We run our race, we travel our journey, in the words of Hebrews, before "a great cloud of witnesses" (**Hebrews 12:1**). When we face a decision to fall back or press on, the whole universe holds its breath-angels, demons, our friends and foes, and the Trinity itself-watching with bated breath to see what we will do. We are still in the drama of Act III and the heart of God is still on trial. The question that lingers from the fall of Satan and the fall of man remains: Will anyone trust the great heart of Father, or will we shrink back in faithless fear?

As we grow into the love of God and the freedom of our own hearts, we grow in our ability to cast our vote on behalf of God. Our acts of love and sacrifice, the little decisions to leave our false loves behind and the great struggles of our heart reveal to the world our true identity:

We really are the sons and daughters of God. One of the most poisonous of all Satan's whispers is simply, "Things will never change." That lie kills expectation, trapping our heart forever in the present. To keep desire alive and flourishing, we must renew our vision for what lies ahead. Things will not always be like this. Jesus has promised to "make all things new". Eye has not seen, ear has not heard all that God has in store for his lovers, which does not mean "we have no clue so don't even try to imagine", but rather you cannot outdream God. Desire is kept alive by imagination, the antidote to resignation, which is to say, we will need hope...

Life on the road [with God] requires recollection of our Love's past deeds on our behalf and His promise of continued faithfulness to us. We will need courage and patience and those are strengthened by remembering. We will need memory, which is to say, we will need faith. Faith looks back and draws courage; hope looks ahead and keeps desire alive. And meantime? In the meantime we need one more item for our journey. To appreciate what it may be, we have to step back and ask, what is all this for?

The resurrection of our heart, the discovery of our role in the Larger Story, entering into the Sacred Romance - why do we pursue these things? If we say we seek all of this for our own sake, we're right back where we started: lost in our own story. Jesus said that when a person lives merely to preserve his life, he eventually loses it altogether. Rather, He said, give your life away and discover life as it was always meant to be. "Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self" (**Matthew 16:25, The Message**)...The road we travel will take us into the battle to restore beauty in all things, chief among them the hearts of those we know. We grow in glory so that we might assist others in doing so; we give our glory to increase theirs. In order to fulfill the purpose of our journey, we will need a passion to increase glory; we will need love.

Memory, imagination, and a passion for glory - these we must keep close at hand if we are to see the journey to its end. Dragons and nits and the noonday demons lie in wait. But the road is not entirely rough. There are oases along the way. It would be a dreadful mistake to assume that our Beloved is only waiting for us at the end of the road. Our communion with him sustains us along our path.

As our soul grows in the love of God and journeys forth toward him, our heart's capacities also grow and expand: "Thou shalt enlarge my heart" (**Psalm 119:32 KJV**). A friend of mine is a missionary to Muslims in Senegal. He tells me that after conversion, Muslims will often notice flowers for the first time. Prior to salvation, Muslims in that and country live a very utilitarian existence. Things are valued only for what they can do. Their houses are dull and drab; trees are only appreciated if they are fruit trees; if they have a function. It is as if the Muslims have lived without beauty for their whole lives and now, having their souls released from bondage, they are freed into the pleasures of God's creative heart. I'm struck by the parallels to modern fundamentalism. Their hatred of pleasure is not a sign of their godliness; quite the opposite. The redeemed heart hungers for beauty.

But the sword cuts both ways. While our heart grows in its capacity for pleasure, it grows in its capacity to know pain. The two go hand in hand. What, then, shall we do with disappointment? We can be our own enemy, depending on how we handle the heartache that comes with desire. To want is to suffer; the word passion means to suffer.

This is why many Christians are reluctant to listen to their hearts: They know that their dullness is keeping them from feeling the pain of life. Many of us have chosen simply not to want so much; it's safer that way. It's also godless. That's stoicism, not Christianity. Sanctification is an awakening, the rousing of our souls from the dead sleep of sin into the fullness of their capacity for life...

I am a lucky man. I have a family and friends who love me well. But they also let me down. When I feel the pain of their failure, I have several options. I can retreat into cynicism ("Isn't that the way life really is?") and deaden the pain by killing my desire. Or I can become more demanding ("You Will never do that again"), manipulating them and in a way increasing my addiction to relationship. Or I can let it be a reminder that a day is coming when we will all

live in perfect love. I can let the ache lead me deeper into my heart and higher toward heaven. And this is where memory comes in. Desire keeps us moving forward; memory keeps us moving in the right direction. If we choose the way of desire, our greatest enemy on the road ahead is not the Arrows, nor Satan, nor our false lovers. The most crippling thing that besets the pilgrim heart is simply forgetfulness, or more accurately, the failure to remember...

Spiritual amnesia is so likely that from Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures are full of the call to remember. "Only be careful," says our Lover, "and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live" (**Deuteronomy 4:9**). How then can we keep these things in our hearts? How can we, in the words of Dan Allender, "reclaim the treasures of memory for our life's journey"? The author of Hebrews answers, "Rehearse the story. Go over it item by item - particularly the central scene" (p.199-203).

A good friend of mine made an interesting comment while I was going through a long trial that had been dragging on for many years. He said, "God has BIG plans for us now, not just in the future." In this life we can be tempted to resignation that we won't have the things we dream of such as "the good life" and think that we will just have to struggle through life, build the character we need and just have to wait until the Kingdom to experience "the good life".

That may well be the lot of some in God's plan for them to bring out the best in them but that is more the exception than the rule. We are precious and wonderful to Him and He longs to give us good things in life when He feels we are ready to handle them. Character is more important than comfort and blessings but He does care for us and wants to give us the latter also.

He knows our strengths and our talents and when our lives have been tested sufficiently and our hearts have become ready and prepared through the struggles of life He often will open up the windows of heaven and bless us. This is something that I have seen happen in my own life after years of struggle much like the happy ending that came upon Lieutenant Dan quite unexpectedly to him. He also wants us to use those blessings that finally come and tap into our full potential and talents and really help others with those blessings and talents.

In the final chapter of "The Sacred Romance" they speak of the future at the end of the Book of Revelation that will be more exciting than we can possibly dream of. Knowing that makes all the pain and suffering we go through in this life worth enduring through to achieve that fantastic future (**Romans 8:18**) as Paul writes.

Paul speaks of the whole creation – the whole universe – waiting to be set free from its bondage to decay as we transform it and create beauty all over the universe with God (**Romans 8:21-23**). That is our ultimate destiny – joining the family business of creating beauty.

John Eldridge and Brent Curtis in their last chapter speak of going to heaven which is the traditional teaching of mainstream Christianity but not the Bible. They do speak of it in a different way than is usually taught in mainstream Christianity. They speak of us - the children of God – enjoying all of the new heaven and the new earth – not just simply being in the same spot in heaven for all eternity and thus it is a little closer to what actually is in the Bible. The Bible speaks of heaven coming to earth so, in one sense, we will go to heaven if you are speaking of heaven on earth when God the Father brings His headquarters to the new earth (**Revelation 21, 22**). For better clarity and accuracy in the last chapter I now quote from I have edited heaven with [God's Kingdom] where I feel it works better:

Act IV – Our Happy Ending in the Kingdom of God

My wife, Stasi, reads the end of novels first. Until recently, I (John) never understood why. "I want to know how the story ends, to see if it's worth reading," she explained. "A story is only as good as its ending. Even the best stories leave you empty if the last chapter is disappointing.

"But the opposite is also true," she added. "A really tragic story can be saved by a happy ending."

“But doesn’t knowing the end take away the drama?” I asked.

“It only takes away the fear and frees you to enjoy the drama. Besides, some things are too important to be left to chance,” she said, and turned back to her book.

A story is only as good as its ending. Without a happy ending that draws us on in eager anticipation, our journey becomes a nightmare of endless struggle. Is this all there is? Is this as good as it gets? On a recent flight I was chatting with one of the attendants about her spiritual beliefs. A follower of a New Age guru, she said with all earnestness, “I don’t believe in heaven. I believe life is a never-ending cycle of birth and death.” “What a horror,” I thought to myself, “This Story had better have a happy ending.” St. Paul felt the same. If this is as good as it gets, he said, you may as well stop at a bar on the way home and tie one on; go to Nordstrom’s and max out all your credit cards; bake a cake and eat the whole thing. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (**1 Corinthians 15:32**).

Our hearts cannot live without hope. Gabriel Marcel says that “hope is for the soul what breathing is for the living organism”...

“I knew a man who as a young boy hated the idea of heaven. He would puzzle and embarrass his Sunday school teachers by stating quite boldly, whenever the subject of heaven was brought up, that he didn’t want to go there. Finally, one of them had the sense to ask him why. His answer? “I don’t like peas.” He had heard the familiar Christmas carol “Silent Night,” with the lovely refrain “Sleep in heavenly peace” and thought it referred to the vegetable. Like any red-blooded boy he figured there had to be better things to do.

Our images aren’t much better. We speak so seldom of heaven and when we do, the images are sickly: fat babies fluttering around with tiny wings, bored saints lazing on shapeless clouds, strumming harps and wondering what’s happening back on earth where the real action is.

The crisis of hope that afflicts the church today is a crisis of imagination. Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft writes:

“Medieval imagery (which is almost totally biblical imagery) of light, jewels, stars, candies, trumpets, and angels no longer fits our ranch-style, supermarket world. Pathetic modern substitutes of fluffy clouds, sexless cherubs, harps and metal halos (not halos of light) presided over by a stuffy divine Chairman of the Bored are a joke, not a glory. Even more modern, more up-to-date substitutes – Heaven as a comfortable feeling of peace and kindness, sweetness and light, and God as a vague grandfatherly benevolence, a senile philanthropist – are even more insipid. Our pictures of Heaven simply do not move us; they are not moving pictures. It is this aesthetic failure rather than intellectual or moral failures in our pictures of Heaven and of God that threatens faith most potently today. Our pictures of Heaven are dull, platitudinous and syrupy; therefore, so is our faith, our hope, and our love of Heaven.... It doesn’t matter whether it’s a dull lie or a dull truth. Dullness, not doubt, is the strongest enemy of faith, just as indifference, not hate, is the strongest enemy of love” (Everything You Wanted to Know About Heaven).

If our pictures of [God’s Kingdom] are to move us, they must be moving pictures. So go ahead –dream a little. Use your imagination. Picture the best possible ending to your story you can. If that isn’t heaven, something better is. When Paul says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (**1 Corinthians 2:9**), he simply means we cannot outdream God. What is at the end of our personal journeys? Something beyond our wildest imagination. But if we explore the secrets of our heart in the light of the promises of Scripture, we can discover clues. As we have said from Chapter 1, there is in the heart of every man, woman, and child an inconsolable longing for intimacy, for beauty, and for adventure. What will [God’s Kingdom] offer to our heart of hearts?...

Intimacy in God's Kingdom

[The Kingdom of God] is the beginning of an adventure in intimacy, “a world of love,” as Jonathan Edwards wrote, “where God is the fountain.” The Holy Spirit, through the human authors of Scripture, chose the imagery of a wedding feast for a reason. It’s not just any kind of party; it is a wedding feast. What sets this special feast apart from all others is the unique intimacy of the wedding night. The Spirit uses the most secret and tender experience on earth – the union of husband and wife – to convey the depth of intimacy that we will partake with our Lord in [God’s Kingdom]. He is the Bridegroom and the church is His bride. In the consummation of love, we shall know Him and be known. There we shall receive our new name, known only to our Lover, which He shall give to us on a white stone (**Revelation 2:17**)...

The intimacy that begins between God and His people will be enriched and echoed by our communion with each other. The deepest longing of our heart – our longing to be part of the sacred circle, to be inside – reveals to us the greatest of the treasures heaven has in store. For we were made in and for the most sacred circle of all. Lewis says,

“The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last” (The Weight of Glory)...

Beauty in the Kingdom

We long for beauty, and when the biblical writers speak of heaven, they use the most beautiful imagery they can. You can almost hear the agony of the writer trying to get it right while knowing he falls far short of what he sees. In the book of Revelation, St. John uses the word like again and again. “And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.... Before the throne there was ... a sea of glass like crystal” (**Revelation 4:3, 6 NASB**). The beauty cannot be captured, only alluded to by the most beautiful things on earth.

I believe the beauty of [God’s Kingdom] is why the Bible says we shall be “feasted.” It’s not merely that there will be no suffering, though that will be tremendous joy in itself; to have every Arrow we’ve ever known pulled out and every wound dressed with the leaves from the tree of life (**Revelation 22:2**). But there is more. We will have glorified bodies with which to partake of all the beauty of [God’s Kingdom]. As Edwards wrote, “Every faculty will be an inlet of delight.” We will eat freely the fruit of the tree of life and drink deeply from the river of life that flows through the city. And the food will satisfy not just our body but our soul. As Lewis said,

“We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it” (The Weight of Glory). And so we shall.

Adventure in the Kingdom

What will we do in [God’s Kingdom]? The Sunday comics picture saints lying about on clouds, strumming harps. It hardly takes your breath away. The fact that most Christians have a gut sense that earth is more exciting than heaven points to the deceptive powers of the enemy and our own failure of imagination. What do we do with the idea of “eternal rest”? That sounds like the slogan of a middle-class cemetery. We know [God’s Kingdom] begins with a party, but then what? A long nap after the feast? The typical evangelical response – “We will worship God” – doesn’t help either. The answer is certainly biblical, and perhaps my

reaction is merely a reflection on me, but it sounds so one-dimensional. Something in my heart says, "That's all? How many hymns and choruses can we sing?"

We will worship God in [God's Kingdom], meaning all of life will finally be worship, not round after round of "Amazing Grace." The parable of the minas in **Luke 19** and the talents in **Matthew 25** foreshadow a day when we shall exercise our real place in God's economy, the role we have been preparing for on earth. He who has been faithful in the small things will be given even greater adventures in [God's Kingdom]. We long for adventure, to be caught up in something larger than ourselves, a drama of heroic proportions. This isn't just a need for continual excitement, it's part of our design. Few of us ever sense that our talents are being used to their fullest; our creative abilities are rarely given wings in this life. When **Revelation 3** speaks of us being "pillars in the temple of our God," it doesn't mean architecture. Rather, Christ promises that we shall be actively fulfilling our total design in the adventures of the new kingdom.

Act IV – [God's Kingdom] – is the continuation of the Story that was interrupted by the Fall. God made the earth and entrusted it to us, to bring order and increase beauty. We were to be his regents, reigning with his blessing and authority. That arrangement was corrupted by the Fall so that the earth no longer responds to our leadership as it once did. When Christ accomplished our redemption, He didn't do it to place us on the bench for eternity. He restored us to put us back in the game. He even subjected the earth to a time of futility until the day it will be "liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (**Romans 8:21**).

We will then co-reign with Christ. "St. Peter for a few seconds walked on the water," Lewis reminds us, "and the day will come when there will be a re-made universe, infinitely obedient to the will of glorified and obedient men, when we can do all things, when we shall be those gods that we are described as being in Scripture."

Part of the adventure will be to explore the wonders of the new heaven and new earth, the most breathtaking of which will be God Himself. We will have all eternity to explore the mysteries of God, and not just explore, but celebrate and share with one another. Here is a remarkable thing to consider: Your soul has a unique shape that fits God. We are not the same, but unique creations each of us...

However God may choose to evaluate our lives, whatever memory of our past we shall have in heaven, we know this: It will only contribute to our joy. We will read our story by the light of redemption and see how God has used both the good and the bad, the sorrow and the gladness for our welfare and His glory. With the assurance of total forgiveness we will be free to know ourselves fully, walking again through the seasons of life to linger over the cherished moments and stand in awe at God's grace for the moments we have tried so hard to forget. Our gratitude and awe will swell into worship of a Lover so strong and kind as to make us fully his own...

For now, our life is a journey of high stakes and frequent danger. But we have turned the corner; the long years in exile are winding down and we are approaching home. There is no longer any question as to whether we will make it and if it will be good when we get there. "I am going there to prepare a place for you," Jesus promised. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me" (**John 14:2-3**).

One day soon we will round a bend in the road and our dreams will come true. We really will live happily ever after. The long years in exile will be swept away in the joyful tears of our arrival home. Every day when we rise, we can tell ourselves, My journey today will bring me closer to home; it may be just around the bend. All we long for we shall have; all we long to be, we will be. All that has hurt us so deeply – the dragons and nits, the Arrows and our false lovers, and Satan himself – they will all be swept away. And then real life begins (p.177-193).

Futher Information

John Eldridge & Brent Curtis' book "The Sacred Romance" (Thomas Nelson Publishers) can be purchased at most christian bookstores as well as John Eldridge's book and DVD "Epic" which covers the four acts of the great story of God's plan (https://www.ransomedheart.com/RH_Ministries_Store/detail.aspx?ID=12).

My 12 lesson Young Adults Bible Study Course is available to be viewed online at <http://ultimatechurcharchive.org/online%20cc/index.html>

You can also order the CD for the Bible Study Course I make available for free by filling out the online form at my website (<http://www.rogerswebsite.com/CD.htm>).

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