

Narratives

About 15 years ago, Hollywood produced a science-fiction movie entitled, “Déjà Vu.” It turned out to be a really big hit at the box office, bringing in many millions of dollars. The plot was totally absurd, even to the point of silliness. But there was lots of good action, a terrific underwater scene, a wicked bad guy, a car chase (naturally), and several really neat, fiery explosions. In the story, a detective tries to solve a mass murder crime by going back in time to try to prevent it from happening. He enters a (preposterous) time machine and, by reliving events, results in a completely changed history from what had in fact happened. At the end, the viewer is forced to wonder, Which depicted reality is the *real* reality? They can’t both be true. The plot is nonsense, OK. But I mention it because it provoked some thought about what narratives are true and what are false, and, more importantly, whether it’s actually possible to change history.

Pundits recently have been writing a lot about “narratives.” That’s probably because there are lots of narratives on offer:

Buddhists and Hindus have their particular narratives (think karma and reincarnation, and bathing in the Ganges), and billions of people believe them. Science has its narrative about billions of years of progressive geologic history and then Darwinian evolution of life. Innumerable books and scholarly articles have been written on it by highly intelligent people, and millions and millions of people in the Western world believe it. Marxists have their narrative about laborers and capital and revolutions. Progressives have their narrative about history moving inexorably from superstition and ignorance toward social justice, equality and an ideal society. Young people and others in our nation, by the millions, not only believe this narrative, they engage with it in order to radically change American society. Environmentalists have their narratives about climate change and the resultant scary scenarios that they imagine are expected as earth warms (or was it that earth cools, the story seems to change). Physicists have their bizarre narratives about countless universes distinctly different from but parallel to our own. Some celebrity elite intellectuals allege the true narrative is that there is no reality! Everything, including our consciousness, is just the expression of an artificial intelligence in some super-computer somewhere in the cosmos. Some believe that there is no reality, everything’s just a solipsism. During Congress’ hearings on Supreme Court nominees, women emerged to tell their particular “narratives” about sexual liaisons with or sexual abuse from the nominees. It turned out that they were fantasies, but the media made them credible by labeling them “narratives.”

Narratives are compelling. It’s easier to believe a story than a propositional statement. Jesus Himself told mini-narratives (we call them parables) because they teach a lesson in a believable and memorable way. The Bible itself tells a narrative. Let’s very briefly review it (a longer, more complete version will be next week’s Sunday school lesson):

God created this world out of nothing. He populated it with unique creatures made in His image able to relate to Him. These human creatures were to serve God as His subordinates, exercising rule over His creation. But those humans chose instead to rebel against God, refusing to trust His word. They thus transferred loyalty to an evil supernatural creature and necessarily serve that evil one. Instead of annihilating them, which they deserved, God decreed death as a penalty for their sin. And God’s love for His human creatures led Him to undertake a mission to rescue and restore them to Himself. Their sins and rebellion demanded eternal punishment, because God’s infinite holiness and goodness was offended. But instead, in love, God took upon Himself human form in the person of Jesus, entered His creation, and suffered and died a death that had infinite value. God lovingly substituted Himself for the punishment that His humans deserved. Because God has eternal life in Himself, death could not hold Him, so Jesus rose from the dead and lives today and forever. God’s justice was satisfied by that death and resurrection. So reconciliation is possible. And forgiveness of sin is freely offered. Thus people are able to enter into a relationship with God and be eternally blessed by Him. At some point in the future, their sin nature will be removed and God will transform them to be like Himself. And they will be with God forever. Rejecting the narrative means remaining in a rebellious state, identified with that evil one and alienated from God forever.

So, which of all these narratives do we believe? Our ultimate destiny hangs on it. The Bible’s narrative is true as compellingly evidenced by the resurrection of Christ. Other intrinsic evidences to the truth of the Bible’s narrative exist, and we’ve discussed them repeatedly through the years in Sunday School. What’s astonishing is that billions, yes, billions of people, many quite intelligent, believe the other narratives without any evidence whatsoever that they are true! Truth seems not to matter, as long as it’s a really good story and it leaves God out. As the Bible is true, *demonstrably* true, then all the other narratives that people believe, which are all contrary to that of the Bible, must be false. In love, God has made the distinction between true and false narratives simple and clear so that anyone who wants to can understand the issue and rightly decide. Yet humanists, atheists, all those determined to ignore God, and all those who glory in their ability to reason, when it comes to understanding the truth of the Word of God . . . they can’t do it.

God has exhaustive knowledge of everything. He knows all that will happen, all that could happen, and even what would happen if what could happen happened. But His foreknowledge doesn’t necessarily mean that everything that happens is predetermined. God gave us free will, which is why He holds us accountable. (We’re not totally free; God sovereignly superintends our acts, so there are limits to our freedom.) If there were no free will so that all history was merely the

outworking of His sovereign will, He couldn't (and, in justice wouldn't) hold us accountable. Robots don't have accountability. God has highly honored us by endowing us with free will and permitting its exercise.

There are a number of points in the Bible's narratives when things really could have gone differently. And the entire course of history would have been different. God allows humans to decide their destiny. For example, at Mount Sinai, God wanted the people of Israel, whom He had just miraculously delivered from Egypt, having them pass thru the Red Sea with a wall of water to their right and to their left, to ascend the mountain to be in the very presence of their glorious God. In fear, they refused to go up. The golden calf incident, likewise, is something the people freely chose to do. The Mosaic Law evidently was given to preserve and restrain that nation until a future day. A millennium and a half of repeated failure resulted. We should understand that it might not have been that way. Another example: After the resurrection of Christ, in view of the preaching of the Gospel and the fact that there was no dead body anywhere (and the leaders of the nation certainly looked), the Jewish nation could have, *should have* repented of their dreadful act and become followers of Christ. Christ then would have returned and established the promised Kingdom. The nation didn't. As a result, we have had so far 2,000 years of Church Age and continuing Jewish and Gentile rebellion. Although God foreknew these events, they were freely chosen by those people living then. He didn't necessarily fore-ordain them.

There were times when I would have to leave the house to go do something or other that was needed, and my daughter would call out as I was about to leave saying, "Daddy, please don't go. I need you to help me with . . . [whatever it was]." And so, out of love, I'd change my plans and stay to help her. It is possible that God similarly, out of love, permits the course of history to go differently according to the will of his human creatures. Nevertheless, He still sovereignly rules His creation and will see to it that His purposes are fulfilled. In this albeit limited sense, then, we can change the flow of history.

Donald Gray Barnhouse used to teach that prayer doesn't change God; rather, that prayer changes us. There's truth in this piety. After all, God is, as we've said, sovereign ruler of His creation. And He has a will and a purpose for His creation that is being – and must be – fulfilled. But if it's true that God allows His creatures to exercise their will in a real sense, then it may be that our prayers can and do influence God to change His acts. We are His children and He is our loving Father. We know from the Scriptures His will, and if we apply His revealed will in the nitty-gritty of life through prayer, we should expect God to hear us and to answer our prayers. The course of history may actually change. Reality is, of course, what God wants it to be, but He's evidently open to input from us.

We've been given a unique and great privilege: prayer. God covets our prayers. He stores them in heaven. Yet, we exercise the privilege of prayer so sparingly. Why is that? One possible reason is that we know our sins prevent us from approaching a holy God. We need to be holy as He is holy because that's His will for us and so that our prayers are not hindered. Another reason is, we're too easily distracted by the things of this world. Satan has seen to it that America has a massively over-saturated culture to keep us from God. We need greater distance from the entertainment and the toys and the clamorous phony issues that the world puts on offer, so that we can be closer to God. A third reason is a terribly sad one: we don't really desire to be in God's presence. And/or we're simply not interested in others. We're happy enough with our own interests. Caring for or about others is an unnecessary bother. May God have mercy on us! We need to change, not the reality we inhabit, but *ourselves*!

God holds us in such high esteem that He allows us to approach Him to intercede for others, acting as priests. He allows us to complain, to express thanks, to question what's happening, even to plead for mercy. He wants us to relate to Him. By means of prayer, we acknowledge His sovereignty, His great power and wisdom, and His transcendent love. And we're humbled – as indeed we should be, finite creatures that we are, when we're in prayer. Prayer expresses our intrinsic weakness; we're not the autonomous beings we once supposed we were. Prayer helps us transform into the image of Christ now, in this life. And, hey, who knows, prayer may actually change the reality of history.

Two narratives vie for the heart and mind of believers. The narrative that's popular, so much so that it seems to define modern American Christianity, is attend church on Sunday morning, don't tell lies, steal or commit adultery, and be patriotic. The biblical narrative for the Christian in contrast is, serve Christ and others in some biblical way, become increasingly holy in one's personal life, and live out the word of God by practicing righteousness. And, at the very center, is prayer. May God help us to choose our narrative carefully!