



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

## THE CHRONICLES OF YAHWEH, PART I • Rick James

Apart from Christ, life is without context. By “context,” I mean a story line that gives meaning to life and significance to our actions. As no one likes being in a story without a plot, the secular world is constantly generating plausible story lines to imprint some kind of meaning upon our existence. Think, for example, of the children’s movie *The Lion King*. How do we make sense of all of the living, dying, and suffering in the world? Answer: we are part of “the circle of life”! You’re not just roadkill; you’re a meal for something further up the food chain, so . . . cheer up, I guess. As all such invented story lines are but painted backdrops for the stage of life, you don’t want to look too closely at the frail conceptual framework that props them up. They’re just catchy soundtracks, something to whistle when the lights go out.

Here’s another popular story line: what gives ultimate meaning to our life is to be remembered, living on in the hearts and minds of others. So forget your wallet, forget your car keys, but for the love of God, remember the 300 (Frank Miller’s *300*). Or remember the Titans. Or remember the Alamo. Or remember the Holocaust. Or remember, remember the fifth of November (V for Vendetta). You’d better remember—if you forget, we’re dead. You can go to a Borders or a Blockbuster and find dozens of these invented contexts or story lines that—in a random universe—provide meaning to our lives and purpose to our existence. It’s as if Satan, fearing the loss of his audience, went out and hired J. J. Abrams (*Lost*, *Alias*) or M. Night Shyamalan to generate plausible story lines for a life without God.

But, as Christians, that’s not our problem. Not anymore. Our salvation brought with it spiritual riches beyond measure, not the least of which is a sense of purpose and meaning. Because we know God, we have answers to our deepest existential questions: who and what we are; how we got here; why we exist; why people suffer; where we’re going when we die . . . and the list goes on.

### In Search of a Plot

Well, almost all questions. While our relationship with God gives context to everything and answers any number of angst-ridden questions, it doesn’t necessarily answer the question “What should I do on Monday morning—or for the rest of my life for that matter?” I mean, sure, every day we can get up and love God and neighbors in any number of ways. But while that is meaningful, it’s more of a purpose to life than a plot. Christian lives always have a purpose (to glorify God, in case you forgot) but not necessarily a plot.

This point couldn’t be more important, so let me explain what I mean. Let’s start with the definition of plot so we can distinguish it from purpose. The dictionary defines plot as “a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict or tension, leading to a climax and a resolution.”

What, for example, was the purpose of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*? It’s clearly defined in the last book: the purpose is that, having come to love Aslan in Narnia, the reader might come to love Christ in the real world. That’s the purpose of the story, but it’s not the plot or story line, is it? While one could get confused with all the talking badgers and other critters, the story line goes something like: there is a struggle between good and evil going on for control of Narnia and the fate of its inhabitants. See, that’s worth a \$28 bag of popcorn. That’s a story line



complete with protagonist, antagonist, tension, conflict, and resolution—the elements that always revolve around the nucleus of plot.

Or let's imagine a new show we'll call Christians LOST. A plane crashes and strands a group of Christians on a mysterious island. The purpose of the Christians on the island is the same as for Christians everywhere: to glorify God. To serve others to the glory of God, cook food to the glory of God, encourage one another to the glory of God, turn coconuts into dinnerware to the glory of God, and so on, ad infinitum. It's a purposeful little community but as boring to watch as Teletubbies, and that's because there's no plot. But what if I add this to the story: the castaways must struggle to find a way off the island while malevolent forces try to thwart their efforts and annihilate the community? See, now we have tension, conflict—plot.

The point is this: Christians by and large mistake purpose for plot. We were created to glorify God, to love and serve him in everything we do. But there is a plot to the Christian life, not just a purpose, and it is not until we understand that plot, and the broader story line of history, that we truly have a context for our life on this planet. So, what is the plot? The plot of the Christian life, as it so happens, is identical to the plot or story line of Scripture. And that plot is the expansion of the kingdom of God in this world and the proclamation of its king, over and against the powers of evil that oppose the purposes, plans, and reign of God.

It's true that every life is a story; it's just not true that every story (life) is interesting—or even worth reading for that matter. And that holds true for Christian lives as well. But when we embrace the biblical plot, our lives also take on plot. As soon as we seek to expand God's kingdom, we experience the opposition of Satan (the antagonist), persecution and conflict, created tensions, victories and failures, climaxing action and resolution, and through the intensity of the struggle, character development (the other hallmark of a good story). Our lives become a darn good story, the book jacket littered with superlatives: “pulse-pounding action”; “90-mph thrill ride”; “pure adrenaline.”

And as one day you and I will need to give an account of our stories (our lives) to the Lord, we would be wise to give due attention to the development of this plot.

Now, as I said, the plot, or story line, of the Christian life is one and the same as the plot of the Bible. So what we want to do is trace that plot as it is introduced in Genesis and develops over the pages of the Old and New Testaments. This is a critical exercise, because at some point you and I are called to jump into the story ourselves and play a role in bringing it to its climax and resolution.

### The Genesis of Genesis

In most books the opening pages introduce us to the plot, and in this sense—though it feels heretical to say it—the Bible is like any other book. In fact, almost everything we need to know about the plot of the Bible is found in the first chapters of Genesis. Through the account of Adam and Eve, we learn that humankind was a unique creation bearing the stamp of God's image like Roosevelt on a dime. As such, we were to be his representatives administering his kingdom in this world, whatever that might have looked like prior to the Fall of Man. But fall we did.

As the drama reveals, being made in God's image carried with it an unusual capacity: the human creation, among other things, came off the assembly line with the option of free will. But this capacity came bundled with a liability, namely the possibility to sin, to make the alternate choice. And so the stage is set and now all our story needs is a antagonist, and sure enough he slithers in on cue.

What we know of Satan in Scripture is all that God wants us to know, and it's not a whole heck of a lot. Apparently, all we need to know is that there is a spiritual dimension apart from the physical and it includes spiritual beings who possess intelligence and independence of will. Though a different order of creation, they are not unlike us, and where there's a will, there's always a way for rebellion. The result of which has been a cosmic struggle in the spiritual order, a struggle that bleeds through into the physical universe as seen in the lives of Adam and Eve and billions of other people since them.



But all things being equal, all things are not equal. There is not a “balance in the force,” or equity between good and evil, just an almighty Yin and finite, sniveling little Yangs. God alone is all wise, all powerful, and all knowing. God is Creator and part of his creation is an order of spiritual beings, some benevolent (angels), some no longer so (Satan and demonic forces). That these evil forces are able to persist in their rebellion against God is not a reflection of their power but of God’s ultimate purposes in allowing them to do so.

What ultimate purposes might there be? I’m sure there are many, some knowable and some not. One purpose we witness in Genesis is for spiritual evil to play a role as antagonist in the human story. God’s infinite intelligence means that second-guessing the author would be foolish, but Adam and Eve up and did it anyway.

Yet even as Adam and Eve failed and fell, God immediately intervened to preserve his plan and expand his kingdom, regardless of how costly the salvage operations might be.

### Salvage Operations

Although God’s kingdom could not be effectively governed through Adam and Eve, hope sprang up through a godly son named Abel. But hope didn’t live long. In fact, hope was brutally murdered out in a field by his brother Cain, and now another chess piece is yanked from the board, with the pawns of evil multiplying.

By merely the sixth page of Genesis, we encounter this evaluation of humankind, sounding much like a eulogy: “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (Genesis 6:5-6).

Sin had spread through the body of humanity, and the only hope was an emergency operation: find a gland, organ, or appendage where the cancer had not fully spread and amputate the cancerous remains. And so a righteous man was found by the name of Noah. He and his family were preserved from the flood of judgment—godly seed artificially inseminated into a new postdiluvian world.

But while the immediate threat of evil was drowned in the deluge, sin persisted and proliferated. The spiritual arms race wasn’t over, not by a long shot. In Genesis 11 we see that sin once again coalesced, this time in the city of Babel, where the human race rallied around a great tower to make a run at heaven. God’s assessment of the danger to the expansion of his kingdom was as follows: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them” (11:6). So God splintered the human language at the city of Babel, and while sin could and would continue to spread, this merciful intervention diluted its potency.

In these opening chapters of Genesis the plot and action come at us like the opening sequence of a James Bond movie, and it’s about to settle down to the pace of life. The plot, if you missed it, is that God is seeking to establish his kingdom and reign within his creation, this world. The enemy at first was Satan and the dark spiritual forces, but these were quickly joined by the vast majority of humanity who find greater pleasure in sin and rebellion than in serving and loving God. However, as we see in Genesis 12, God was going to unveil a new means by which to establish and spread his kingdom on earth, an experiment that would occupy the rest of the Old Testament.

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