

LOST THE PLOT

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE - each book started with the disclaimer: ***“BEWARE and WARNING - you and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story.”***

They were stories written from a **second person point of view**, where the reader assumed the role of **protagonist** through a series of decisions at the end of each page. Based on your choices, you'd skip around the pages of the book as you created your own plot, determining the character's fate.

R.A. Montgomery's intent was to teach youth 2 things:

Agency – you have a part to play.

Responsibility – how you play your part has repercussions.

In his brief one year stint at Yale Divinity School Montgomery was taught by the chaplain **William Sloan Coffin**. This was the school year that spanned 1958-1959. Right before the sit-ins, the freedom riders, the March on Washington, and big events of the Civil Rights Movement. Coffin believed that to be a minister meant he must also be an activist and advocate of social justice. He often preached on **courage**, calling it the virtue that makes all other virtues possible. *“Every time people say when they see the innocent suffering, every time they lift their eye to heaven and say, “God how could you let this happen?” it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: “How could you let this happen?” So you have to take responsibility.”*

This man – R.A. Montgomery's chaplain who disciplined him for one year, clearly believed that the Bible tells a story and WE have a part to play. And this theme – one of courageous agency and the responsibility to make choices that pull from one's values – is one R.A. Montgomery would weave into his career as an author in a style and format that absolutely took off.

Per a recent study:

Only roughly 30% of professing Christians in America will read their Bible cover to cover.

So – most Christians – the ones that actually engage their Bible – do so by flipping pages back and forth throughout their Bible.

Like the Choose Your Own Adventure Books... two different people can take different paths through the Bible, highlight different verses, and come to different conclusions and life perspectives.

Like Choose Your Own Adventure Books...

The Bible tells a story and you have a part to play in it.

But there's a **big** difference...

God is the director. The Story has been told. And to jump around is to lose the plot.

We're called to responsibly and courageously take part in God's story of redemption and be ministers of reconciliation.

And how well we play our part as the Body of Christ... it has repercussions.

You could argue convincingly based on statistics in America – we, the Church in America, have played our part poorly.

I'd argue one reason the Church hasn't played its part well because we've lost the plot. Our religious leaders can be not that unlike the religious leaders of Jesus' day – specifically the Pharisees and Sadducees – who had a thirst for power, a self defensiveness that bordered on unrepentance, and a general lack of courage.

And when Jesus confronts them in John 5, he says the following in verse 39:
You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.

(MSG) *You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. **But you miss the forest for the trees.** These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.*

Jesus in his rebuke is saying you've missed the forest for the trees. You've lost the plot. The Pharisees had their Bible and MEMORIZED IT. They weren't unfamiliar. But the Bible tells a story. The story of Jesus. He was standing right in front of them but they missed him. And to miss Jesus is to miss the point and lose the plot.

The cure? We similarly see two Christ followers missing Christ standing right in front of them because in their minds he didn't build the kingdom he expected and he was still dead. *Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?" Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from **all** the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

For them to understand fully. For them to see Jesus fully. It took ALL the Scriptures.

To strip the core of the Bible down to its benefits as the Pharisees did – *as Jesus points to their desire to possess eternal life* – this can leave you utterly disconnected from the God who died to have relationship with you!

The Old Testament is **preparation** for Jesus.
The Gospels are a **presentation** of Jesus Christ
And the rest of the New Testament is about our **participation** in the Body of Christ

The Bible is a story with a beginning: Genesis 1-2 or 1-11 depending on how you want to slice it, And an end that we see in Matthew 25 and Revelation 21-22.

The rest is the middle.

Because of the sheer length of the middle of the Bible... we often skip to shortcuts.

Again - if we're being brutally honest, many Christians have applied choose your own adventure to the Bible. Many devotionals and short reading plans have a Choose Your Own Adventure feel
"Stuck in suffering? Turn to..." *"Want a healthier marriage? Turn to..."*

The Bible is a story and we have a part to play.
It's not enough to "have our heads in the Bible constantly" as the Pharisees did.
How we approach the Bible matters, and we quickly lose the plot when we handle scripture in three ways I want to highlight tonight, along with the price we pay.

Read it as a RULEBOOK.

It can seem that the Bible is about what you are doing wrong. What you should be doing. How to do it. This is the perspective the religious leaders and Pharisees largely fell into.

It starts out sounding promising, but reading the Bible as a rulebook leads to burnout, because there is no "how to" unless we embrace the person of Christ.

In **Mark 8, verses 34 & 35**, Jesus is teaching his disciples when he tells them:
*"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am... Follow me and I'll show you how. **Self-help is no help at all.**"*

He's saying follow me. But let go of the wheel.
This isn't Choose Your Own Adventure. I'm the driver. I'm the director.

Psalm 119:105 famously speaks to God's divine direction, saying:
*"**your word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path.**"*

We ask questions like if God's will and plan for my life is so important, why is it so hard to find?
We feel like we're in the dark because we're looking for the wrong thing.
We are looking for how to insert the Bible into the story we're living, as a ten step plan to purpose, a how to, or directions,
rather than to find **our** place in **its** story.

But David, the author of Psalm 119, certainly found his place in God's story.
I believe this is because of Psalm 119 and the way David speaks of scripture.

Psalm 119:97 – **"Oh how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long!"**
He saw the law paints a portrait of who God is- how He thinks, who He is.
David reads scripture correctly as introducing us to the main character in our story – God.

He says "You" 41 times in Psalm 119. He says "I" 109 times.
This overwhelming use of personal pronouns speaks to a personal relationship.

You see **the cost** of reading the Bible like a **rulebook** – is you lose **relationship**.
Not reading the Bible as a story can have you missing the main character when he's standing in front of you. And when you lose connection to the main character in the story, you can lose your own place in the plot.

Bible as promises –

We like for our time in the Bible to give us good vibes. But when you only embrace the sunny passages in scripture, dark seasons in life can leave you shook.

But we naturally don't like the heavy and hard stuff. So we choose our own adventure through the Bible and bounce around the promises, the peaceful passages, the grace and the blessings. This shapes a fragile theology.

Where prosperity theology offers us all the things. We build a theology that gives us all the feels.

When we read the Bible as pieces of promises, we miss out on 1 Timothy 3:16-17

All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training, So that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

To not give all of yourself to all of scripture is to be ill-equipped. But we like reassurance without the rebuke. Confirmation without the correction Transformation without the training.

Where the cost of reading the Bible as a rulebook is to miss relationship with the main character. To read the Bible as a collection of promises and blessings and not also wrestle with aspects of scripture like the commands to live holy and the weight of sin in our own lives... is to forsake our character development.

Rorschach test - In the test, it doesn't really matter what the ink blot looks like – what matters is what you see in it and what that says about your personality, emotions, and alike.

The author Ellen Goodman once said – *“I have known dozens of people who use the Bible like a Rorschach test rather than a religious text. They read more into the ink than they read out of it.”*

We live in a culture of **“your truth”** and **“my truth”**

The sentiment behind these phrases is often well intended: Your story matters. Your life experience matters. Your unique voice as a result - matters. But truth? Truth doesn't change.

It's because of this “my truth” influence that so many people feel no need to dig deep into scripture to make sure they're lined up with God's truth. There's no need to when *“I've got peace about it”* or *“I don't think a loving God would do that or make me do that”* carry more weight than what the Bible actually says.

Dr. Eric Mason - **“narcigesis”** Pulling from the word Narcissus, or narcissism, and...

Exegesis is the act of extracting Biblical meaning of the text FROM the text.

Narcigesis puts **us** at the center of the text, making it about us instead of Jesus.

It's how the Bible gets mixed in with the Prosperity Gospel, the Hebrew Israelites movement, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and all kinds of movements.

We attempt to weave the Bible into our story instead of seeing how we are but a thread woven into the Bible's.

The Force Awakens - numerous actors and actresses lined up to play cameo, background, low-to-no-profile roles. Chief among them was **Daniel Craig**. He asked to play “*some sort of secret cameo role.*”

Why? The most likely explanation for why Craig and others all but *volunteered* for such roles, is that Star Wars is such a huge story in film history that these actors happily stepped into a role, even if it wasn't a starring one.

Rich fulfillment in life is much more often found in participating in a larger cause and more significant story - regardless of who gets famous - than to be the star of a smaller, less significant one.

Jesus called **John the Baptist** a star. The greatest... he said of those born of women there has not been one greater than John the Baptist.

But even John the Baptist realized he was a cameo role in a greater story. He says in Matthew 3:11: “[Jesus] is the main character in this drama. Compared to him I'm a mere stagehand.”

When we reduce the Gospel to its benefits, to what we get out of it as an individual, And when we make our personal salvation the whole story, we can not only find ourself out of relationship with Jesus, we can find ourselves disconnected from the Church.

The story of scripture clearly shows us God's redemption is community shaped. It takes place in and through a covenant community – first Israel, then the Church.

And our idea of “Church” can become so small.

Four walls and a 90 minute service on a Saturday. It's bigger than City Life. Here's a visual...

Rwanda. Honduras. Malawi. Ukraine images.

As much as the places in these images may seem like a galaxy far far away, our future and our story is tied to theirs (Revelation 7:9-10), just as all of our stories are tied to the story of Bible. We're a part of something much bigger than me, and much bigger than us in this room and this region. Much bigger than this blip of a moment in history.

While the Bible isn't a “choose your own adventure,” we could take notes from the lesson R.A. Montgomery was trying to teach. You have agency. You have responsibility. You need courage.

We the Church are far too often passive, lacking courageous agency.

I'm convinced it's because we forget the story of the Bible, namely its ending. Matthew 25 and Revelation 21 - that ending isn't here yet. We have a part to play in the plot of God reconciling mankind out of sin and back to relationship and communion.

May we be a church full of people that realizes we have a part to play...

Where we've placed ourselves at the center and made the Bible about our story... forgive us

Where we've counted ourself out, feeling disqualified and forsaken... forgive us

Where we've forsaken the Bible itself... forgive us