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## Summer Playlist

### Part 10 – I Will Choose My Story

#### Rene Schlaepfer

I get to join you every single summer when I visit out here from California and speak at Kanakuk, and it's always our privilege. A lot has happened in the life of our family for the last year. The three biggest highlights are this. Since I've been with you last, we have had not one, not two, but three new family additions, three little grandbabies. That is so rewarding for me to hear that from you. Let's say it together. One, two, three... AWW. This is Emmett and that's Willa and that's Amelia and all three of our adult kids all have COVID babies, so it's just the best.

These are three bright spots for us, but let's all admit that the last year has also had some not so bright spots. And it continues that way with the weird weather, they're talking about new variants and Monkey Pox, and all kinds of stuff. The other day, somebody emailed me and said, "Pastor, it seems like every single day when I open up a news app or social media apps, there is something new to get freaked out about." Do you relate to that? I notice that even as a pastor, I notice members of my own congregation just falling into despair. That's part of the reason why I wrote this book that Katie talked about – Faith Forward; the subtitle is How to Live Courageously in an uncertain world.

What I want to talk about this morning is the basic concept behind this book. It's a concept that's found all through the Bible, like literally on every single page. And yet, many Christians seem to completely miss it. Let's pray together and ask the Lord to bless this time.

Heavenly Father, I just pray; I know that many people who are joining us right now, whether it's virtually or in person here in the auditorium or elsewhere on campus, are stressed right now, or anxious right now, or are just feeling tired. So, God, by the power of your Holy Spirit and by your inspired word, I pray that you would lift us up. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

I want to start with a question that has puzzled scientists really for centuries. The question is this: **What is it that makes us humans different that other creatures?** Now, just think about this for just a second. Before you come up with a quick answer, let me suggest that it maybe a little bit more difficult to determine what really makes us absolutely different than you suspect. Of course, as Christians, we know that we are created in the image of God, but what I'm talking about is how does this work itself out practically, in daily life? How is the image of God seen in us? People used to say, "Well, language." But since then, we've discovered that some animals actually do use a rudimentary form of language, most famously, whales, right? They communicate some pretty complicated concepts like, "There are predators two miles downstream. Circle around them." Nobody really understands their language yet, but it's clear that they use language through their songs.

Then people thought, Well, tools, but obviously there are animals like even crows and other birds that use wire and things to get at food.

So, what makes us different? Time magazine famously reported on some experiments that some scientist performed because they had a hunch about this. They did an interesting experiment. They wrote a series of puppet shows. They showed these puppet shows to an audience of little kids, actually hundreds of audiences of kids in cultures all around the world. Now, these puppet shows had no words. They were just actions that were telling stories. They showed these stories over and over again to very young children. What they found was even the littlest kids really got into the stories. They started anticipating the plot and they started to realize, *oh, that guys the bad guy and he's going to jump out and he's going to scare the other characters and he's going to try to trick the other characters.* They almost instantly understood that a story was being told.

And then they showed the exact same puppet shows to primates, to chimps and other apes, again, all over the world. They never got it... ever. They were like what is happening up there. The scientists' conclusion was this: what makes humans different from other creatures? At least one thing is storytelling. We humans are apparently the only one of God's creatures that tell stories. In fact, think about it. Stories are how we make sense of the world. We take events in our lives, and we have this built in... Apparently, God created human drive to make sense of random events, to put those events into narratives, into storylines.

I picture it kind of like this. Events are like separate dots on a piece of paper. We connect those dots into story lines as lines that connect the dots and help predict the outcome, where the story line is going. One dot might be a personal crisis like a divorce or maybe you get fired from a job or you have cancer. Another dot might be a global crisis, like the war in Ukraine or the COVID crises and so on. One person will take those same two dots and tell a story that those dots fill into that trends downward. "Yeah, these events are just one more confirmation that everything is going downhill, it's all going to hell in a handbasket. God hates me and the world is crumbling. And these events just prove that story."

Another person fits those exact same events into a differing storyline that trends up, the same, exact events. "These events are trials that God's going to use to strengthen me. God's going to use even this for good, I just know it." Same exact events, two completely different storylines.

Here's the big idea. You cannot choose the events of your life. I mean, you have some tiny bit of control, but there are so many of them that are global events and personal events and health events that you cannot choose. How many of you realize by now the life-giving realization that you cannot choose most events in your life? Do you understand that? But you can choose the story. In fact, you should choose the story because the story you choose changes your experience of the events in a real way.

It's kind of like this. I love Pixar movies like the Movie UP. That one gets me every single time. I cry every single time I watch this movie. Raise your hand if you cried when you watched UP. Raise your hand if you've ever cried at a movie in your life. Raise your hand if you've ever felt uplifted after you've seen a movie. Now, did anything happen to you in real life while you sat in that chair and watched that

movie that uplifted you or that made you cry? Did anything actually happen to you in your life. No. Why did you have those emotions? They were entirely created by storytelling. It is so powerful. And the same exact thing is true of your everyday life. Many, if not most of your emotions of fear, of confidence, of joy, of apprehension, are created by the stories that you choose.

As a pastor, here's why I'm so concerned about this. I just read that the number of people engaging with online news sources has doubled in the last two years. That's no surprise with COVID and the elections and all the other social crises going on. Everybody is now online. They are scrolling the newsfeeds all the time. Here's why this is a problem. Unfortunately, according to an organization called Newsguard, which is non-partisan, the amount of misleading news content has also doubled. So many Christians are falling prey to this. In fact, I just read the study about what are the groups that are pushing forward their content on social media? Everybody is on social media. There are over a billion people on Facebook alone. But who is actually active, who is actually promoting their stuff on social media? Now, over 90% of the people that are pushing stuff out on social media fall into four groups – the extreme left, the extreme right, trolls, and Russians that literally have as their stated goal to undermine western democracies. The sad thing is so many Christians are falling prey to the narratives that those groups are pushing out on social media.

Adam talked a little bit about this last weekend here, right? I spoke about this in my message here last summer. Research has found that for some reason, we Christians are particularly apt to pass on false news stories and social media posts and negative stories and conspiracy theories and click bait. In other words, we Christians are supposed to be about good news, but often we're about bad news or even fake news. It's time for us to be more discerning about the stories that we consume and pass along. I see so many Christians acting like baby birds when it comes to social media and the news. "Just feed me whatever you've got; I'll eat whatever worm looks appetizing." Just eating up whatever they see on the newsfeed as gospel truth. Not every story is gospel truth. That is so, so important for us to realize.

Here's our key verse for today. 2 Corinthians 10: 5. This is just so key. Again, this stuff tails right into where Adam was coming from last weekend. I encourage you to look at that message if you haven't seen it yet. ***5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*** What's Paul saying? He's saying that there are a lot of storylines, there a lot of narratives that are contrary to the gospel, and so you need to take back control. Don't be a stupid baby bird. Don't just sit there passively and let everybody else tell you their story line. Because you can't change, as we said, most of the events of your life. But you can change the way you experience life.

You can change the emotional temperature of your life and of Branson and of this country and of your church if you very carefully make these three choices. I have three points this morning. You can jot these down; they're easy to remember.

**1. I must choose the story I hear.** Here's why this is so important right now. Something has happened in the last ten or fifteen years in the world that is different than anything that has happened before. For all those centuries for most of human history, the storytellers were elders like the older crowd or religious leaders, civic leaders. And the purpose of the stories they told ultimately was guidance on how

to live life. For the first time in human history, the storytellers are no longer kind of the wise elders. Now, the storytellers are the media. It could be new media, social media, traditional corporate media, but they are the ones that are telling us the stories now and what is their purpose for telling their stories? I don't think it's diabolical, but their purpose is simple. They are in business most of them. Their purpose is you could say eyeballs. They want your clicks. Again, like Adam talked about last weekend, they want your views. They want your likes because they get dollars from that. So, if that's their purpose – think this through – what kind of stories are they going to tell? If they want more views, what kind of stories are they going to tell?

Research has shown that stories with three elements get our attention. This is probably just because of some kind of primitive brain thing where we learn to respond to these things, but stories that have the three elements typically get our attention. Those three elements (probably no surprise) are sex, violence, and threats, and especially the third one – threats. And so, every single story they tell is told in as threatening a way as possible. For example, I heard a story that went something like this. One of the Dallas Cowboys receivers or something, some second stringer is looking to renegotiate his contract. Here's the way the story was told. "News out of the Cowboys today could spell doom for the cowboys. Story at 11:00." Doom, right? Or "Formica, could it be the hidden killer in your kitchen? The story at 11:00." Every single little thing is told in as threatening a way as possible so is it any wonder that people today are full of emotions like fear and apprehension and frustration. Those emotions are created by these constant thing that we are being told all the time.

But you have the ability to stop that and choose to hear a different story. And for Christians of course I'm talking about the gospel story. You might hear the gospel story and go, *Yeah, the gospel like the four spiritual laws. I accepted Jesus, I know what you're talking about.* I'm talking about the gospel story that permeates every single moment of your life. This is as easy that I think I can help you picture this. I think of the gospel as having a shape like an inverted bell curve. Jesus came from glory, from heaven, and he became one of us and then died on a cross. But then he rose again, and he did this to save us from our sins. And when we put our trust in that, we are saved. That is the core of the gospel message. Glory to death to life. Cross to resurrection. Weakness to power. But if you're a Christian, this is not just something that happened one time in history. This is now your story. This is now the shape of your life inexorably. In my experience as a pastor, so many believers are like, "What are you talking about?" Once you look for it, you see this on every page of scripture.

Let me take you to a familiar verse in 2 Corinthians 4: 8, 9. Paul is going through some tough stuff, but he says, **8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed...** Raise your hand if you've ever felt perplexed in the last couple of years. ... **but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.** We love that verse but in the next two or three verses, he explains why and those are the verses we don't read.

Paul goes on to say, **11 For (because) we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.** Skip to Verse 14. **14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.**

What is all this about death, life, death, life? Paul is repeating a pattern. He's saying this is our storyline. This is how we connect all the random dots, the events of our lives, our church's life, our world history.

N.T. Wright can probably explain this better than I can. He's like a genius. He taught New Testament at both Oxford and Cambridge so he's a decently smart guy. He talks about 2 Corinthians this way. *"The strange royal comfort that comes from the suffering, death, and new resurrection life of Jesus. He is determined to view all of his suffering and all of the troubles through the lens of the gospel. The gospel, as Paul summarizes it, is about Jesus that he died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day. Now, it matters vitally to Paul that these were real events that actually took place, but it matters just as much that they become the lens through which the whole world can be seen in proper focus, the grid on which all reality and personal experience can be plotted"*

What we're saying is the gospel has a shape. The whole worship set was about this, right? He turns graves into gardens. He turns bone into armies. He turns those deep seas into highways. Amen? And that's what he does in our lives too. In the Christian life, we can expect both death and resurrection. And this is very, very important to understand.

**In life there are crosses.** You must understand this. If you're expecting victory after victory after victory, you're going to be blown away in the bad times. You're going to think, *How can this be? God doesn't love me.* But if you only expect crosses, disasters, one after another, and you've gotten to the point where you're just waiting for the other shoe to drop, you fall into pessimism and despair. Paul is saying our lives have both. In life there are crosses, yes. That's just reality. If you are in a cross moment in your life, a death moment, a buried in the ground moment, God's not mad at you. God hasn't abandoned you. God's not punishing you. That's just life. Even Jesus' life had a cross.

Yet there is also resurrection. There will come new life and new blessings and redemption and restoration. That is the shape of the gospel, that is the shape of the Christian life. When you plot your personal crises and global crises onto that story line, it changes everything. You cannot change those events, but you can change the storyline, but you have to do it consciously and proactively, and not just sit there like a baby bird and let everybody else tell you their stories.

Here's how important this is. Psychologist Dan McAdams has done some fascinating research. He's found that people who are pessimists, people who tend to despair are more apt to tell what he calls contamination narratives. Contamination narratives are about how something was really good in my life, had a lot of promise, but then the man was against me, or I messed it up one more time.

"Hey, how was your Hawaii Vacation." "Well Hawaii was great but let me tell you what happened on the way back. That airline totally ruined our vacation."

"Hey, How are you set up for retirement." "Well, okay I guess, but you know what? I had a bunch of Tesla stock, sold it when it was at its low and now... I could have been a millionaire."

You know people like that, right? They are always telling a contamination story. "Everybody has it against me. I always mess up my life."

Now people who have a fulfilling life tend to tell what he calls redemption narratives. Redemption narratives tell the exact same event, but they talk about how good came out of it. And this is not a Christian. This is a secular psychologist who has noticed this trend like, “Yeah, our airline messed up on the way back from Hawaii. We had this one-day long delay but guess what? In the waiting room at the airport, I was able to get in a great conversation about Jesus with this guy that was sitting right next to me. It was awesome.” “Yeah, you know what? I got this job and I got fired from it, but it allowed me to discover my true passion in life and it turned into the best thing that ever happened to me.”

You know people who are always telling redemption narratives, right? When it comes down to it, these are the two kinds of narratives you can tell and the two kinds of narratives that you can hear about your own life. This is so important for us to understand because in the Bible, God is telling us a gigantic redemption narrative. So, are you choosing to hear God’s redemption narrative, or a contamination narrative? Think about that. How everything is going to pot. “Yep, Branson is not what it used to be.” “Yep, the world is sinking fast.” Or a redemption narrative. You and I need to choose the story we listen to, we hear, and make sure it is gospel shaped.

Let me just apply this very quickly. I’m spending most of my time on the first point of three here. Don’t worry. Some of you are still letting your cruel parent tell you your story about how worthless you are, about how you’ll never amount to anything. For some of you, that parent has been dead for years. You do not have to let them tell you your story any more. Let your loving heavenly Father tell your story. Or is your primary narrative, “Yeah, I was hurt by X, and that hurt now defines me.” Hurt does not have to be the end of your story. Instead, hear this story. Yes, in life there is death. Yes, there are crosses, but every crucifixion will be turned to resurrection when we are in the Lord. That is the gospel story, amen? So, frame every event through that story. Filter every hurt through that story. Kling to that story in times of fear. Kling to that story in times of failure. Hear that story.

**2. I must choose the story I live.** Raise your hand if you’ve ever heard the story of Bethany Hamilton, the famous surfer. Have you heard of her? At age 13, she was bitten by a shark off the coast of Kauai and lost her left arm. That’s a big, bad event for sure on her timeline. She could have chosen to weave it into all kinds of storylines. Here’s the story line she lives out. Look at this quote. “It was a terrible thing that happened to me, but so many good things have come out of it that it turned into a beautiful thing.” Now, is that a contamination narrative or a redemption narrative? That’s a redemption narrative, right?

It reminds me of Joseph’s story in the Bible. Remember that story. One bad thing after another happens to him. He’s thrown into a pit by his own brothers. He’s enslaved, he’s imprisoned. Yet he eventually rises to power. He’s able to save his family and he tells them, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.” Is that a contamination narrative or a redemption narrative? That’s a redemption narrative.

It reminds me of my good friend, a man named Rick Alvord. I wanted to bring Rick here with me and have him on the platform with me today. I wish I could have done it, but Woodland Hills wouldn’t pop for his plane ticket, so instead, what I did was this Zoom interview. Here’s about 2 ½ minutes of it.

[video plays] **Rene:** Thank you for joining me, Rick. You have quite a story.

**Rick:** Life was going along as normal and then all of the sudden, in 1997, I was involved in a pretty significant auto accident. I was transitioning from one freeway to another freeway on a transition bridge in Southern California. As I traveled along, a young driver was going a little too fast, hit my Jeep Grand Cherokee in the back corner. The jeep probably rolled three times over and over and then went off the transition bridge, landing about 65 feet below on full gas tank, flipped over on the roof and slid down by the edge of the 91 freeway. As you can imagine that kind of a fall, there were significant injuries. Medially speaking, I shouldn't be here today. God did amazing miracles. But in the process, I did loose feeling in my legs and the use of my legs from my waist down, so that was a pretty significant day, but the fact that I am here and God spared my life that day and it was part of his story and I'm very thankful for that.

**Rene:** So, Rick, you've been paralyzed from the waist down since that day. You have been in a wheelchair since that day, and you could fit that event into the storyline of resentment and blame and anger, but you have chosen a different storyline. Tell us about that.

**Rick:** Well, my wife, Laura and I, we decided early on that we wouldn't be asking the why questions because this is part of God's story. We'd be asking what next? And so, our approach has been all along not to be asking what if I'd asked one more question that day and I wouldn't have been on the freeway at that time? What if the meeting that day was actually moved up 30 minutes from what it was originally scheduled to be? We could do it all day long, but we chose not to look at those questions, but look at the question of what next? What does God have for us? How can he use us in the remaining days we have on this earth to impact his kingdom?

So, as you look at my story and think about it, it's really not a matter of what happened to me that day; what's more important is how does this fit into God's over all story? People have found the Lord for the first time as a result of our accident. People have been drawn closer to Him. So, at the end of the day, it's really God's story and we're believing and trusting that story is good for us in the end. It's hard. It's not an easy life, but in the end, it will be exactly what He is calling it. His will. What He wanted.

**Rene:** Do you have anything to say to people who are going through a crisis right now in their life.

**Rick:** I would say to people in crises now... and there a number of people that are hurting in so many different areas. I would say, "Folks, stay focused on what God is bringing to you, what God's doing in your life, how he's working in your life. As a result of what he's doing, in the end, you will be a better person."

That's a powerful story, isn't it? It's amazing. Let me ask you this question. Is that a contamination narrative or a redemption narrative? That's a redemption narrative. In fact, in telling that story, he's illustrating my third point. We not only need to choose the story that we hear and choose the story that we live out on a daily basis.

**3. We must choose the story that we tell.** I need to choose the story that I tell. Here's why this is so important. Tania Luna did a story published in a child psychology and psychiatry journal. It's a fascinating story. She showed kids a series of intense images like a dog snarling. She measured their response. Obviously, most kids are going to respond with fear and anxiety when they see this picture. Then she had them look at the same exact set of images again, but this time with comforting captions like "This dog is defending a little girl." It was like they were seeing completely different photos. All their fear responses went away and instead, they became happy. Same exact photographs, different storyline.

Here's why she did that research. Her specialty is veterans with PTSD. She says that adults who learn how to handle traumatic events in their lives have that same skill. They kind of caption the photographs differently. As she puts it, "They don't deny the traumatic event, but they add a personal narrative that redeems the picture: I grew, I learned, I deepened, I am a better person now." It's not denial. It's not some weirdo false positivity. No, it's connecting the dots in a different way. This is so very important to us.

So as we wrap up, I want you to ask yourself: "What is the story I am telling myself?" Maybe you have what I call a negative narrator inside your head. Forget social media. Forget traditional media. You have that negative narrator telling you a negative story inside your own brain. "You always make a fool out of yourself. "Think of all the mistakes you've made in the past; you'll probably just fail again." That is not God's story. God's story is you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. God's story is the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work in you. God's story is God will work all things together for good. You need to call out the negative narrator. Whether it comes from social media or some news headline or inside your own head.

So, what is the story you're telling yourself? And second, what is the story you are telling others? Are you an agent of hope? Too many Christians are agents of gloom these days.

Let me ask you something very frankly. When you forward a news story, when you forward an article, when you forward some social medial, post a Tweet, or a Facebook post or a tik toc video or anything else. Is that a contamination narrative you're forwarding? Are you contributing to the toxic conversation or is that a redemption narrative that you can use to illustrate the gospel in your posts and in your relationships with people? What story are you telling yourself and what story are you telling others? Christians, this is so important because there are powerful forces in this world that want you to see everything through the lens of their stories. This is not a left or right thing. This is people on the left, people on the right, and people that are indifferent to politics; they just want to make money. But they are powerful, so you need to take control of the story you hear, the story you live, and the story you tell.

Lord, help us to connect the dots to your story line, to connect the events of our lives to the gospel story that yes, there are crucifixions, but there will be resurrections inevitably and inexorably, not because of us but because of your power and your promise and your person. God, right here right now, there are some people who may be understanding for the very first time that becoming a Christian isn't just praying one prayer, one time. It's becoming a part of a story you are writing, the gospel story that takes

the contamination narrative of a fallen world and weaves it into the redemption narrative that you wrote on that Easter Sunday when you turned a grave into a garden. God, there may be people in this room right now who say "I want to take my place in that story. Lord, I receive you. I walk into your newness of life, granted to me by Jesus Christ. Help me to grow in that." And Lord, help all of us to choose the story we hear and live out and especially the story we tell to the world so in need of your redemption narrative.

In Jesus name we pray. All God's people said... Amen.