

# MATHETES

from the author of *Genuine Existence*

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## MEDITATION 1 SAGA

“If you’ve heard this story before, don’t stop me, because I’d like to hear it again.”  
--Groucho Marx

“Once upon a time...” “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...”  
“Marley was dead.” “This book is largely concerned with Hobbits...” “In the beginning...” This is the opening sentence, the precursor to a great story. In the case of these lines, “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Beauty and the Beast”, “Star Wars”, “A Christmas Carol” and “The Lord of the Rings” come to mind. And yet the fourth sentence seems distinct from the rest. Numerous people know this simple statement: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>i</sup>

Few have the time or willpower to read the Scriptures consistently. But I notice in my reading a story of grand intrigue is unfolding. Glance through the pages and it quickly becomes apparent the Scriptures follow the literary plot structure. There is an exposition, or introduction of the main characters. The action begins to rise, the conflict clear and the struggle visible. Tension builds to a pivotal climax, a substantial and timely turning point. And then the action falls as the conflict is resolved. Full completion arrives in the *denouement*, or “untying” of the plot. And the process repeats.

But the story weaved in the Scriptures is *atypical* of the common narrative. It is unfinished. It is still being crafted. It is as a tale of full and complete reconciliation.

An invitation exists in all good stories too – the choice of deciding whether to enter into it, to become part of the action, the excitement, the tension. In fact, this is how I gauge films, whether the story is compelling, riveting, worthy of my time and the financial outlay it requires. When one considers the Scriptures, the choice is deciding whether to become part of God’s story or writing one independently. St. Paul summarizes this tension when he writes to the church in Rome. His thoughts are a powerful and poignant synopsis of the internal

conflict, of choosing good or evil. He writes, "So I find this law (struggle) at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me."<sup>ii</sup> I surmise he is saying the ability to make the harder choice, while difficult, is attainable.

Wisdom is discovered when the words of Jesus are studied. For instance, he instructs his followers to be light, to illuminate the darkness. I have come to see numerous followers of Jesus read and practice this teaching in reverse. In other words, they tend to judge and condemn those who live outside relationship with Jesus, thus creating an "us" vs. "them" or "in" vs. "out" mentality. Who is in error though? And is this distinction necessary? It is my deep belief followers of Jesus are the ones mistaken.

The Genesis narrative underscores this position. Fashioned in the image of God, the man and woman enjoy a life of light, resting and savoring the paradise God surrounds them with. Evil, portrayed as a serpent, knows this too, but knows another wisdom also exists. Consumed with the thought of undermining Eden, the serpent reveals this knowledge to the first humans, seductively enticing them with forbidden fruit.

With consumption, they stand naked before God, alarmed and aware, perhaps ashamed.<sup>iii</sup> Nude before God, cognizant of knowledge not previously known, they exchange bewildered expressions. Evil breaks the presence of good and the marvelous light dims.

The light of God peers through the cracks through circumstances, through the actions of family, friends, colleagues. And when the eyes open, when temporary bliss fails, an internal struggle emerges, similar to the words of St. Paul. A choice becomes visible: enter into the story of God or reject it.

Plato noted this powerful choice in his most popular work, The Republic. Speaking to an eager pupil, he shares "The Allegory of the Cave", a prolific tale about a prisoner who exits darkness and steps into newfound light...

"I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground

chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads."

The prison guards pass figures of men and animals in front of the firelight, creating realistic shadows on the wall for the chained captives to gaze upon. Each prisoner believes this is authentic reality, for they have never known nor seen otherwise. One moment changes this falsehood:

"Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. What do you think he would say if he was told that what he used to see was so much empty nonsense and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him?"  
'And if,' I went on, 'he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.'"iv

God does not forcibly pull men and women to revelation; he continually draws them into illumination and understanding through a still whisper. Plato's parable echoes the Scriptures, for many have stepped from darkness to light, from ignorance to wisdom, from chaos to calm.

Abraham, for instance, grew up in pagan Ur, surrounded by false gods and detestable practices. God invited him out of this landscape, summoning him to a life of difference, a life of meaning and purpose, distinction and direction.

God also beckoned Paul into meaningful life, rebuking his zealous legalism, showering him with undeserved grace and poignant direction.

And Jesus? He continues to reach out, grasping hands and pulling the willing from the murk and mud of selfish thinking and material indulgence. And if one responds to the call of Jesus and enters into the larger story of redemption, another question emerges...how deep is the passion? In other words, the respondent freely decides the intensity of commitment. Each person owns his or her destiny. In this litigious society, personal responsibility continues to be downplayed as people look for loopholes and negligence of others. It seems integrity is going into the gutter.

The decision to respond to Jesus hinges on the perception of what it means to follow him. A life shaped and forged by do's and don'ts is of no value; it is plagued with legalism, the very state of mind Jesus constantly reprimanded.

The Scriptures reveal this tendency in Matthew 5 and 6, numerous issues Jesus dialogues on. He discusses the changing of the guard, the fulfillment of the old covenant (blood sacrifices, the Law, outward) with the establishment and sustained presence of the new (solitary sacrifice, the cross, inward).

He would often begin teaching with the phrase, "You have heard that it was said" or "It has been said." Notice he is referring to the past, an action of old that has continued to the present. After referring to past teaching, he introduces a new covenant or bond, words of wisdom and insight remarkably unique and remarkably difficult to practice.

For instance, he tells the people that prior teaching commands them to not commit adultery. He then takes this external practice and turns it inward, sharing these words: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."<sup>v</sup> Notice the shift – the difficulty in following this teaching has increased exponentially. Jesus knows the people cannot follow the Law (commandments) and then charges them to abide by them perfectly.

Why does he do this?

Perhaps Jesus does this because he knows the heart of man is fickle, evil and arrogant, capable of wondrous good, but heartbreaking destruction. Up to the point of Jesus, men and women tried to live by the Law, to follow its teaching without faltering. But they failed – and failed often. And to this day, followers of Jesus continue to live by it unconsciously. I know I do, for it is difficult to escape.

Jesus has redeemed humanity though, severing the chains of legalism. But his followers labor under the lie that works merit justification. This thinking is a direct extension of Pharisaical thought, a false belief that inhibits the freedom, the healing God desperately longs to draw everyone into, a freedom marked with amazing love. This freedom is grace.

God calls the willing into his redemptive story and invites them to fall peacefully into his hands of comfort, of shelter, of rest, of peace, of strength. If followers of Jesus adhere to his teachings, they must live by them, constantly striving toward what seems to be the impossible...turning the other cheek, clothing the naked, praying for terrorists, putting others well being above their own.

I am hard pressed to find a greater art form than a compelling and gripping story. We pass tradition and memories onto our children as our ancestors before us did. When I read a gripping story, I struggle when the hero does, anguish when he cries, rejoice when he triumphs. We savor stories because we see ourselves in them. For example, I remember watching “A Little Princess” (1995) yesterday afternoon. The film is directed by Alfonso Cuarón and focuses on a young lady who goes to boarding school when her father is sent overseas to fight during World War I. Her spirit is tested when it is discovered her father has died and her possessions are snatched. Reduced to servitude, I see a remarkable child who continually inspires others and always sees the joyous color people miss in life.

Many see God as distant and aloof, indignant and indifferent to the daily activities of men and women, a cosmic clockmaker who has wound the world up and set it in motion. Others think he simply doesn't exist. But I think he laughs when people do, aches when they fall, cries when they reject his way and create their own. He is not the cosmic clockmaker, winding the world up and watching it unravel.

He is deeply and passionately involved with every step each person takes, every breath inhaled, every success, every failure. I find this to be a warming thought, for even when it seems like I am alone, I continually realize I'm not. God invites the world to join a larger story, a story that continues to unfold with the passing of each day – reconciliation.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 1:1.

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 7:21-23.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 3:7.

<sup>iv</sup> Plato, The Republic. Translated with an Introduction by Desmond Lee, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 241-242.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 5:28.