THE BIG STORY
HOW THE BIBLE MAKES SENSE OUT OF LIFE
JUSTIN BUZZARD
Praise for The Big Story

I think we need to be reminded every single day that we are part of a Bigger Story, part of something greater than ourselves, and that each of our stories matter—a great deal. To be reminded of that truth is to live in Hope. The Big Story gives the reader that gift of Hope.

—SALLY LLOYD-JONES, author of The Jesus Storybook Bible and Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing

A good story needs a good teller. And Justin Buzzard fits that bill. He not only explains the Bible’s dynamic plot, but draws us persuasively into the greatest story ever told—with arresting images and vivid analogies that connect our stories to The Big Story. In the process, you’ll find yourself being swept into a world you didn’t make and therefore can’t unmake. It’s good news in a bad news world.

—MICHAEL HORTON, professor of theology, Westminster Seminary California, cohost of the White Horse Inn, and author of Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christ’s Disciples

I cannot overemphasize the desperate need to retell the amazing storyline of the Bible and our place in that story to new generations. Without this, it is far too easy to drift into unfortunate pathways and dead ends that are sadly missing the beauty of the story God has for us. I am very thankful for Justin’s book, which gives direction to a world in need of understanding the true way, and the true story.

—DAN KIMBALL, pastor, Vintage Faith Church, author of They Like Jesus but Not The Church

The overarching theme of Scripture, of course, is the life of Jesus. What makes this new book by Justin Buzzard so good is that it not only highlights the incredible story of Scripture, but it shows us how our story fits neatly in Jesus’ story. As we understand Jesus’ story, and our place in it, we are motivated to join God on mission, sharing Jesus’ story with the world. This book is a great asset to God’s kingdom work.

—ED STETZER, president of LifeWay Research

You don’t need to read this entire book. Just try the first few pages. I predict you’ll have a hard time putting it down. Justin Buzzard knows the Greatest Story well, and he knows how to retell it in a way that can be compelling to those who have never heard it and refreshing to those of us who need to hear it again and again. Try it and see.

—JUSTIN TAYLOR, coauthor, The Final Days of Jesus, blogger, “Between Two Worlds”
There are great stories and great storytellers. But there is nothing like “The Big Story”. Justin Buzzard captures the compelling drama of the Bible in a way that demands your attention, and ultimately, your allegiance. If you have been skeptical about the message of the Bible, or if you have found its story confusing, sit down with this book immediately. You will quickly see how your story needs to intersect with “The Big Story”.

—J. PAUL NYQUIST, Ph.D., president of Moody Bible Institute

Fundamental to human existence is the question of identity and purpose. Who am I? Why am I here? Justin Buzzard, in his book, *The Big Story*, helps us to find our place in the unfolding drama of life. As the narrative unfolds, get ready to be compellingly called on stage to be a character in the adventure that Buzzard calls the “Big Story”.

—BRYAN LORITTS, lead pastor, Fellowship Memphis and author of *A Cross-Shaped Gospel*

“Epic” is too small a word for the story of God’s work in this world. Justin shares the one big story so you can see the scarlet thread of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice through the tapestry of the Bible. Where does this scarlet thread intersect your life? Rejoice as you read in *The Big Story* that you’re not the center of the universe, and worship Jesus as you learn more about our Savior who set the stars in place and numbered the hairs on your head.

—GLORIA FURMAN, author of *Glimpses of Grace*

Is this Bible a book of rules? Is it an instruction manual for Christians? I was taught both growing up in a nominally Christian family. What I would later discover is that the Bible was neither of those things. Rather, the Bible is God’s grand narrative of humanity’s continued desire to carve their own path, and God’s overwhelming love and continued intervention when our way finally fails us.

The Bible is the story of God’s great love for His creation, what He once called “very good.” And this incredible story culminates in the coming of Jesus, and our being invited, through Him, to find our true place in His story. My friend Justin captures this with earnestness, care, and clarity as he paints for us the beautiful picture of what God is doing in the world, and where we find our place in His story.

—LEONCE CRUMP II, lead elder, Renovation Church

The story of the gospel is the most compelling aspect of our faith, and this book winsomely captures the heart of what makes it so attractive. It addresses life’s greatest struggles and longings with rock-solid truth conveyed through God’s redemption narrative in the Bible.

—MATT CARTER, pastor of preaching and vision at the Austin Stone Community Church and coauthor of *The Real Win: A Man’s Quest for Authentic Success*
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“Stories are how we remember; we tend to forget lists and bullet points.”

—Robert McKee¹

...
What is your story?

In 2011 I moved my wife and three sons to Silicon Valley to pursue a dream. I wanted to start a new church that would engage my city with the gospel (the story of the Bible) in a new way. The day we moved, I had just three people committed to my dream and just three thousand dollars in the church bank account. I’d never felt so excited or so scared. It was a move of faith. I had no guarantees. But it all felt so right, like the next chapter in the story that God was writing for my life.

I’ve always sensed that my life is part of a bigger story. It’s the times when I’ve forgotten this bigger story that I’ve felt the most lost in life. Life is full of seasons. Whether I’ve been navigating a season of excitement or suffering, it’s always been my grip on what I call the “Big Story,” or the Big Story’s grip on me, that has
helped me make sense of the ups and downs of life. Years ago I read a quote that put this perfectly:

The same impulse that makes us want our books to have a plot makes us want our lives to have a plot. We need to feel that we are getting somewhere, making progress. There is something in us that is not satisfied with a merely psychological explanation of our lives. It doesn’t do justice to our conviction that we are on some kind of journey or quest, that there must be some deeper meaning to our lives than whether we feel good about ourselves. Only people who have lost the sense of adventure, mystery, and romance worry about their self-esteem. And at that point what they need is not a good therapist, but a good story. Or more precisely, the central question for us should not be, “What personality dynamics explain my behavior?” but rather, “What sort of story am I in?”

What sort of story am I in? This is the question I’ve been asking all my life. This is the question I believe everyone in my city is asking and needs an answer to. This is the question everyone on the planet needs to wrestle with.

*What sort of story are you in?*

Questions precede answers. There’s no use talking about answers unless we first get our questions right. You and I have our question: *What sort of story are we in?* Throughout the ages people have given many different answers to this question. Your neighbors, coworkers, and local bookstore all offer different answers to our question. If you filled the room you’re in right now with a mixture
of both atheists and deeply religious people, you’d hear fifty different stories from all these people. But they all believe the story that they think makes sense out of their lives.

My conviction is that only one story is big enough to adequately answer this question, to explain all the beauty and all the brokenness we see in this world, to make sense of our desires, dreams, and disappointments. I’ve looked at the other answers to this question, the other stories that are out there, but they all felt too small. I don’t know what people believe in your town or city, but my city is a diverse mix of Buddhists, Atheists, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Mormons, Jews, and Confused (people who aren’t sure what they believe). My conclusion is that these other worldviews don’t make complete sense of this world. Their plots have too many gaps, and their answers are too shallow for our deepest pain, deepest desires, and deepest questions.

The Big Story, the story we need, is the old and ongoing story of the Bible. The Bible is a collection of ancient manuscripts written over fifteen hundred years by over forty different authors that tells one big story about God and people. It’s a strange story. It’s a good story. It’s a complicated and challenging story. It’s a thrilling story. It’s a story that’s still moving, a story in which you play an important part. It, I think, is the only story big enough to make sense out of everything you’ve been through and everything you and the people you love will face in the future.

Let me be up front about how wild this story is. I’m going to spend the next eight chapters walking you through the major movements in this old, yet living book called the Bible, which is about:

- the One Story of God’s incomprehensible, outrageous acts of redemption, the stories of a God gathering a people for His
name. Here in its pages appear fierce and unlikely heroes, terrifying battles, pilloried prophets, resistant saints, miraculous healings, a foot-washing King, a bloodied God on a cross, a hollow tomb, the final wrath and glory judgment, and a denouement that ends more miraculously than anything we could imagine: the coming of a new city with open gates and a purified people now called sons and daughters who, needing no other light, will enter and walk by the light of the Lamb.

Not everyone will be there. It is not a safe or simple story. Yet the story is for all of us to hear and heed. We are invited into these pages, not as editors with red pens in hand, but as supplicants seeking understanding and truth. We are invited to live into this narrative, but not to rewrite it, either to gut it of its offense or to reshape it for short attention spans and better sales.⁴

Even if you don’t believe in God and the Bible as I do, I invite you to listen to this story, to live into it a little, and examine if it does or doesn’t make sense of things for you. Have you ever watched one of those movies that begins in the middle of the story and then goes back to the beginning, to the start of the story? That’s what I’m about to do. We’re going to start in the middle of the story with the greatest disruption you could ever experience in your life: Jesus. Then we’ll go back to the beginning and work our way, front to back, through this Big Story and its five main acts: God, Creation, Rebellion, Rescue, Home (and a short, important intermission). And finally the epilogue of the story: Life, the time of the story in which we now live, a time that’s in between the fourth act (Rescue) and the fifth act (Home).

Whether or not you’re someone who believes in prayer, I in-
vite you to pray a simple prayer before you read this book. I’m writing this book right now believing that you’ll agree to do this, that you’ll pray before you read. I believe prayer changes things. I believe when you pray you’re talking to a God who hears you and cares about you. Prayer can dramatically change the whole experience of writing and reading a book. I have been praying for all of you who are reading this, and now it’s your turn:

God, speak to me as I read this book. Make Yourself more real to me.
Do something new in my life and through my life.

That was easy. Now you may turn the page.

P.S. If you would like to interact with me while reading this book, you can contact me through Twitter (@JustinBuzzard), and I’ll do my best to respond to any messages.
“I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and a chance to sacrifice myself for my love.”

—Leo Tolstoy¹

“...All our human stories of heroes, monsters, journeys, and sacrifice give voice to our universal quest for identity, purpose, and deliverance. Instead of competing with God’s story, these stories gesture toward it.”

—Leslie Leyland Fields²

“...The whole story of the world—and of how we fit into it—is most clearly understood through a careful, direct look at the story of Jesus... how beautifully his life makes sense of ours.”

—Tim Keller³
Recently I was invited by an old friend to join him and six other men and climb Mount Rainier outside of Seattle, Washington—all 14,410 feet of it. I flew north and joined them, strapped on my crampons and backpack, hoisted my ice axe, and started climbing.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done.

This mountain is covered in ice, blanketed in glaciers, with crevasses hundreds of feet deep. Some people might try to convince you those are called crevices, but I’m telling you, those on Mount Rainier are crevasses, and they will kill a man. Toting dozens of pounds of clothing and gear up that mountain was exhausting, petrifying, and thrilling.

The main reason my old friend asked me to join him and the other guys on the climb was to talk about Jesus. See, these other
guys don’t know Jesus, and he wanted me to tell them about Him. My old friend is a former Marine and he figured the best place to have good conversation about Jesus with a bunch of tough guys was on top of a freezing mountain. So, when I wasn’t terrified of falling into a crevasse and dying, I told these men what I know about Jesus.

**Jesus?**
Everyone has a reaction to Jesus. He isn’t someone who can be ignored. Love Him or hate Him, you must respond to Him.

Here are some examples of how a few famous people thought of Jesus.

> “I love the idea of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the beautiful stories about it, which I loved in Sunday school and I collected all the little stickers and put them in my book. But the reality is that organized religion doesn’t seem to work. It turns people into hateful lemmings and it’s not really compassionate.”
> —Elton John

> “The example of Jesus suffering is a factor in the composition of my un-dying faith in non-violence. What then does Jesus mean to me? To me, He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had.”
> —Mahatma Gandhi

> “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue with that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first—rock ’n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary.”
> —John Lennon
“I’m a Muslim, but I think Jesus would have a drink with me. He would be cool. He would talk to me.” — Mike Tyson

So Jesus is a good idea even if His followers aren’t so great. Or maybe He is a fantastic example and a dynamic teacher. It could be that He is just a passing fad who will fade away. (It seems like two thousand years of popularity indicate that’s not the case.) Or maybe, regardless of our worldview, Jesus is a cool guy to hang out with. That’s what these guys thought.

How do you react to Jesus? We are all looking for someone or something to follow. What do you think about the idea of following Jesus?

Disturbance

The reason Jesus elicits such powerful reactions is simple and profound: Jesus disturbs our lives. To disturb means “to interfere with the normal arrangement.” People have to respond to Jesus because He shows up in their lives and starts to interfere. Jesus doesn’t leave things as they are; He both attracts people to Himself and meddles with their lives.

The Bible contains four biographies (also called “Gospels”) about the life of Jesus. In one of those biographies, the book of Mark, we see Jesus doing His disturbing work of simultaneously attracting people to Himself and meddling with their lives. Feel free to read this part of the Bible as I’ve printed it below, or get your hands on a Bible and read these verses—and all following verses—from the pages of your own Bible (that way you can better explore the surrounding context).
Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (Mark 1:14–20)

Jesus arrives on the scene with a message, an attractive message. It’s a message people can’t get enough of. He comes “proclaiming the gospel of God,” that is, the good news of God.

Most people in your context think that Christianity is all about advice—that it’s a list of “dos and don’ts.” They couldn’t be more wrong.

We react far differently to news than we do to advice. Imagine a young wife who, nine months earlier, sent her husband off to war. It’s been a devastating, frightening, and lonely nine months. But a good friend gives her some sound and helpful advice to help her through. The friend tells her, “Be patient. Stay busy. Find yourself a good hobby and some projects to fill your time until your husband comes home. Keep writing him those letters. Stay strong.”

How is the young wife going to react? She’ll likely appreciate the advice and try to absorb it. It will be a help of sorts, but the
advice doesn’t produce joy or relief.

Imagine, though, the same young wife in the same situation. Imagine that same friend coming over, but instead of offering good advice she speaks good news: “Did you hear the news? The war is over! Your husband is coming home! He’s coming back!”

How will that young wife respond? Will she break down and cry tears of relief? Will she run into her friend’s arms, screaming and celebrating? One thing is certain, she will rejoice! People react differently to hearing good news than they do when hearing good advice. Advice gives people more work to do. Good news gives people freedom.

Jesus didn’t come with advice for us to absorb and follow; He came with news. The word gospel means “good news.” It is news that brings joy. The gospel is history-making, life-shaping, paradigm-shattering news. It is news about something done in history that changes you, that changes everything, forever. Jesus does something so radical, so violent, so dramatic, and it seals this good news and makes a way for us to join the Big Story.

It is this news that makes Jesus so attractive and that separates Him from all other religions. He didn’t come dispensing advice on how to clean yourself up and make yourself better. He didn’t offer a list of action items or set of instructions about things you must do to find God, freedom, rest, or peace. No. Jesus came saying that you can be known, loved, set free, forgiven, and made new.

This new life is open to anyone. Anyone can be made new, made clean, set free, given a relationship with the living God. And it is free. There is no earning it. It is yours, no strings attached. The gospel says all this has been done. There isn’t any more doing to do. It’s not advice, so don’t treat the gospel like mere advice. Jesus
came, lived, died, and rose again to earn the way to God, freedom, rest, and peace for you.

Nobody else has ever spoken this way, arriving on the scene and offering *news* of a new life instead of *advice* on how to achieve a better life. Founders of other religions and worldviews ask you to do something—to perform and obey—to bring your doing to the table in order to enjoy the benefits of karma, nirvana, inner peace, a better future, salvation, or whatever the benefit might be. Christianity is the one faith whose founder tells us not to bring Him our doing, but our *need*.

**The Search for a True Story**

But there is more to this story. It is not enough to merely say that Jesus brings true news and good news. No, we must know His story—how His existence, arrival, teaching, and deeds fit within human history.

Jesus is part of a much larger story, an epic story. This story has all the makings of the best, truest stories—conflict, tension, and drama. It comes with that essential, “Uh-oh, how will this be resolved?” ingredient that all the best books and movies have.

When Jesus shows up in Mark 1, He says, “The time is fulfilled” (v. 15). What is fulfilled? What time? See, God has been doing something throughout all of history, through this Big Story told in the Bible, and Jesus is the apex and fulfillment of that story. All the “uh-oh” moments are resolved in Jesus Christ.

Each one of us has a story that we believe, one we use to make sense of our lives and our world. Some of us draw our stories from family legacy while others try to escape the story of their family. Some live the stories of pursuing success, fame, or wealth. Some
of us want to live the story of a hero but are stuck in what seems like a boring story. Some of us fit our lives into a story taught by a religion or a philosopher or thinker we admire. Some of us attach ourselves to the dominant storyline of the city we live in, chasing pleasure in Las Vegas or power in Washington, D.C. We may not even be aware of it or ever have even thought of it in those terms, but it is true. We can’t live without a sense of story. The best way I know to get this across is to again share a quote from the Introduction:

The same impulse that makes us want our books to have a plot makes us want our lives to have a plot. We need to feel that we are getting somewhere, making progress. There is something in us that is not satisfied with a merely psychological explanation of our lives. It doesn’t do justice to our conviction that we are on some kind of journey or quest, that there must be some deeper meaning to our lives than whether we feel good about ourselves. Only people who have lost the sense of adventure, mystery, and romance worry about their self-esteem. And at that point what they need is not a good therapist, but a good story. Or more precisely, the central question for us should not be, “What personality dynamics explain my behavior?” but rather, “What sort of story am I in?”

There is only one true story that can make sense of all we encounter in this broken and beautiful world. I call this the Big Story. It’s the story of the Scriptures. I am going to lay all my cards on the table and state clearly what Jesus tells us, what the Scriptures tell us, and what I have come to believe: You cannot be free
until you come under the reign of the Scriptures, until you accept and live into the Big Story. For those of you who don’t believe this story, I’m not asking you to accept it right now. What I am asking is for you to consider this story, to examine it and try it on. Explore and see if this story is true. I want you to test the Big Story against whatever story you’re using right now to make sense out of your life.

Your Story and Starting in the Middle

Some of the best stories are ones that don’t start at the beginning. They jump in at the middle and draw us in by introducing the best characters and the most dramatic moments without revealing the beginning or the ending just yet. Jesus is the most important character in our stories. His life dramatically shapes our stories. There is no happy ending (or happy middle) without Jesus being the main character in our story, the leading man, the driving force.

And so, in one sense, this book starts in the middle of the story so that you can meet the main character and begin to know Him and trust Him. I want to give away the climax, the most important and dramatic part of this story, but this story needs a beginning, so we will go there next. Because every great story needs not only a great main character, but a strong start. Let’s take the first step of our climb up the mountain, and begin Act 1.
**Story Contrast (Jesus vs. __________):** At the center of the Big Story stands Jesus, whose love both disturbs us and frees us. What, or who, stands at the center of the stories people around you believe? In what ways does having Jesus at the center of the story make for a better story?

**Action Step:** Draw your life story. Get out a piece of paper, draw a line across the center of the page, and graph the most significant moments of your life. Aim to graph about ten significant moments, like in the example below. What patterns do you notice? Who or what has most significantly shaped your story? How does your story fit within the Big Story?

**Recommended Reading:** Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (Dutton, 2009). My friend Eric bought about one thousand copies of this book, and he gives copies away to everyone he can. You’d like my friend Eric, and you’d like this book.
“I had always felt life a story, and if there is a story there is a storyteller.”
—G. K. Chesterton

...“The world does not revolve around you.”
—Anonymous