

The Greatest Story Ever Told
A Message for Valentine's Day, 2021
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Introduction

Every now and then I see an advertisement for a book or a movie. The ad will say, "The Greatest Love Story Ever Told." If I were to ask, "What is the greatest love story ever told?", what would you think? I'm sure we have a lot of ideas.

If you ask the professionals, the critics, you'll get a lot of lofty-sounding reasons for their choice. They'll talk about timing and acting and directing and writing.

Here's an idea: Maybe the best way to tell the best story is by how many people recognize a quote from that story. For example, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." That was a movie from 1970. Its title was, (guess what) "Love Story" written by Erich Segal.

How about this: "You had me at 'hello.'" That's "Jerry Maguire".

"You should be kissed and often, and by someone who knows how." That was Rhett Butler talking to Scarlet O'hara in "Gone with the Wind", by Margaret Mitchell.

Let's try this one: "True Love" (or "Twue Love"). That's from "The Princess Bride."

How about: "Here's looking at you, kid." That would be Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in "Casablanca".

And finally, "Tale as old as time". That's from the Disney film, "Beauty and the beast"

But in all of this, there is a love story that sadly, the average person doesn't know about. And although it's not told as often as it should be, it's by far the greatest love story ever told. It's a story that has the elements of a classic: A great king notices someone - someone of lower station in life. The king falls in love. He's willing to do anything for his beloved. He lavishes gifts upon her. He wants to marry her. He wants to lift her from her humble status to royalty.

The story has suspense. It has mystery. It has other lovers who vie for the heart of the King's bride-to-be. This story has adultery. Then, it has forgiveness. It ends with a royal wedding.

The story appears in the Bible. Let's start with the end of the story: The great royal wedding.

5 Then a voice came from the throne, saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both great and small!" 6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

"Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
7 Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
8 Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear."

(Revelation 19:5-8)

We've just read about an awesome event: The Wedding of the Lamb of God. It will be an event of unimaginable size and splendor that will occur in the future. This wedding marks the end of a love story that was years in the making - In fact, centuries and millennia. This story starts almost 4,000 years ago with a man named Abraham. We read about him starting in Genesis 12. From there we learn about the story of Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel. From there the story takes up, well, the entire Bible.

We can't cover that all today. Instead, we're going to look at an abbreviated version. This abbreviated version starts in symbolic form in the book of Ezekiel.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: "Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite." (Ezekiel 16:3)

The love story starts with the ancient people of Israel when they were living in Jerusalem. Before the people of Israel entered what is today called the land of Israel, it was controlled by a people called the Canaanites. They were at times an independent people. At other times they fell under control of a people called the Hittites. So, God looks at the city and says, "your father was an Amorite (a sub-group of the Canaanites) and your mother a Hittite." The history of these groups gets a bit complex, so for now, let's just say that they all had aspects that were questionable, if not evil.

Here is the great King of the Universe. When a king gets married, he's supposed to find someone from a noble family. At one time, many of the royalty of Europe were inter-related. If you were a prince in the British royal family, you could get married to other British nobility. Or, you could marry a princess from a European country like Denmark or Germany.

There were rare times when someone from the royal and noble classes would fall in love with one of the commoners. This wasn't common, but it happened on occasion. If this were to happen, it was thought that there was something very special about the commoner. Maybe the father was a bold warrior who bravely fought for the kingdom. Maybe they were an outstanding scholar who brought prestige to the kingdom because of their discoveries. In the case of Britain, such individuals could be elevated to the knighthood.

So, here is the King of the Universe. He looks out and he notices someone. He doesn't say, "Your parents were noble and outstanding." He says, "Your father was dubious, and your mother was just as bad." "But", he says, "there was something special about you."

Again, if a great king were to look out and see something special in a young woman, that might work. Maybe it would be beauty? In the Bible we read the story of Queen Esther. She was a poor commoner, but she possessed outstanding beauty and wisdom. So, the king of Babylon married her and elevated her to royalty.

What was it about the ancestors of Israel that stood out? Let's read:

4 On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. 5 No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised. (Ezekiel 16:4-5)

God says to Israel that when he first saw her, she was a newborn child. And not just any newborn – she was totally rejected. He wasn't attracted by beauty, but by compassion.

In ancient days, some cultures allowed parents to decide at birth if they wanted to keep a child. If yes, the child would receive a thumbs-up and join the family. If not, if the child received a thumbs-down, it would be disposed. It would be taken to an isolated area and left to die.

In this case, such a thing happened. Children are born covered in blood and birth fluids. They must be cleaned up. No one did that for the infant Israel. The parents of this child were in such a hurry to get rid of her that they didn't even bother to cut the umbilical cord. They left the child out in the wilderness. But, the great King found her. And he saw something special. He had pity and compassion.

6 "Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!" 7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. (Ezekiel 16:6)

So God saw this totally rejected child and took an interest in her. He cleaned her up and helped her to grow.

We mentioned Abraham earlier. We know certain things about Abraham from the Bible. We know he lived in the land of Ur, which is modern-day Iraq. There are some stories about him in ancient Hebrew tradition. Those stories are not to be taken on the same level of authority as the Bible, but there may be something to them. The stories say that Abraham's father was an idol maker. He carved the statues that his people worshipped.

Idolatry is a terrible thing. However, it's not unforgivable if the people who do it repent and turn away from their idols. This was the case with Abraham. God called him and told him to leave the comfortable lifestyle he had in his home and travel hundreds of miles across dangerous terrain to the land of Canaan. God told Abraham and one day, the land would belong to his descendants.

Now, the locals in that region were never totally comfortable with Abraham and his descendants. The surrounding nations loved their idols. Israel was the representative of the one true God. There were times when they all got along. But there were times when they were at war.

So, this symbolic story references the unstable relationships that ancient Israel had with their neighbors. We read on:

8 "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you ... I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine. (Ezekiel 16:8)

So, the king fell in love with this orphaned child, rejected by her parents and scorned by all her neighbors. He called her to his side to be his bride. He made a solemn oath. He entered into a covenant. In those days, the covenant was the proposal of marriage. The wedding was to follow.

There are many wonderful things about God. Here's one of them: He takes his promises seriously. To him, an oath means something. To him, a covenant can never be broken. He would provide for Israel. He would protect her. And he would love her.

Let's read more:

10 I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put sandals of fine leather on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. 11 I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, 12 and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. 13 So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes

were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was honey, olive oil and the finest flour. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. 14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord. ((Ezekiel 16:10-14))

When Abraham entered the land of Canaan, he was a nomad with a band of nomads. Over time, the nation of Israel grew. Later, under King David, the Kingdom of Israel grew into a power that dominated the region. Under his son Solomon, the nation became wealthy. Under Solomon, the nation became so wealthy that we're told silver was not considered valuable. (I Kings 10:21) If you wanted to give a showy gift in those days, it had to be gold. Solomon was once visited by the powerful "Queen of the South", also known as the "Queen of Sheba". When she saw his wealth and the grandeur of Israel, we're told her breath was taken away (10:4).

This was all because of the kindness and love of God. So, from here, does the love story go straight to the royal wedding? Sadly, no. Here's where the story takes a tragic twist. Let's read on in Ezekiel. Now, we'll warn here. If this were a movie, at some points it would get a "PG-13" rating. In a few places, it might even get an "R".

15 "But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. 16 You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. You went to him, and he possessed your beauty. 17 You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. 18 And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them. 19 Also the food I provided for you—the flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign Lord. (Ezekiel 16:15-19)

I've seen and heard a lot of love stories in my time. Some of the stories involve tragedy: - One of the parties gets sick or is involved in an accident. I've heard stories about lovers breaking up. However, I've never heard a story about one of the partners selling themselves. But that's what happens in this love story. After the great King, the God of Israel, show his love in fantastic ways to the nation of Israel, the majority of its inhabitants rejected him and followed the gods of the surrounding nations. This is after clear protection and rescue from their enemies. This is after going through periods of amazing wealth.

The people of Israel turned away from worship of the one true God and participated in some of the most horrible practices that are followed by pagan worshippers.

What should happen when a great king shows his love to someone and they reject him? - Not only do they reject him, but they insult him in the most terrible ways? Here's what some kings have done - They executed unfaithful brides. King Henry the Eighth executed the wives he didn't like. If he grew tired of them, he accused them of a crime and had their heads taken off. Along the way, one of his potential brides turned down the offer of marriage. It was Christina of Denmark, a duchess. As we said, most royalty looks around for other royalty when they marry. When she heard of King Henry's interest, she replied, "If I had two heads, I would happily put one at the disposal of the King of England".

Brides who are unfaithful to great Kings can expect terrible things to happen. Is that how this love story would end? How did the great King react to the unfaithfulness of his bride-to-be?

I am filled with fury against you, declares the Sovereign Lord... (Ezekiel 16:30)

Well, that's not a good start. This is a great king. The high king of heaven. He's not a wimp. He's not going to roll over and say, "Oh, that's too bad." He's going to do something. On the other hand, this King still loves Israel. As I mentioned earlier, a covenant and an oath mean something.

This King is the King of Love, but he is also the King of Justice. How do those two things meet? This is also the King of eternity. He is the eternal King while also governing the present. How do the eternal and "the now" meet?

59 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. 60 Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. (Ezekiel 16:59-60)

Here's how the eternal and the now met for Israel. If you read the whole chapter, God proclaimed his charges against Israel for her unfaithfulness. And, there was an earthly penalty. A "now" penalty.

Israel did not escape the earthly effects of her crimes. After this prophecy, Israel was attacked and captured by the Babylonians. The city was burned. Many of its inhabitants were killed. Many of its people though, were taken off to live in exile in Babylon for 70 years. After that, they were allowed to return.

After allowing Israel to suffer the consequences of her crimes, God then began to focus on the eternal.

62 So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord.
63 Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done... (Ezekiel 16:62-63)

The “now” for Israel meant she would not escape the earthy consequences of her crimes. The “eternal” was something far better. God loved her. So, he remembered his covenant. He would see that her sins were forgiven; that her sins were atoned for.

This love story, although not as long as the whole Bible, takes more time than we have in one session. So, let me summarize: Israel is the Jewish people. Eventually God included all the other people of the earth. The atonement that God mentioned in Ezekiel 16 was accomplished when God sent his Son, Jesus to die on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus was the “Lamb of God”. Although Israel suffered for her crimes, she could not pay everything. It took the Lamb of God dying on the cross to pay the full penalty for the sins of Israel and for the sins of everyone else.

The love story continues even to this day. All those who are saved by the Lamb of God become part his Church. One day, Church will become the bride of Christ, the Bride of the Lamb.

You all know how we like love stories to end: “And they lived happily ever after”. Here’s how this one ends:

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4)

So as it turns out, in this love story, they all lived happily ever after.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, we’ve just learned about the greatest love story ever told. The great King looks out and sees a commoner of lowly birth. He loves her. He rescues her. He gives her wonderful gifts. Sadly, she is unfaithful. But, although she suffers because of her crimes, in the end, she is forgiven.

In many love stories, this is where things end. We finish our popcorn, and we leave the theater. We go on with life. This love story though, calls for more. It calls for more, because the love story involves each one of us. Movies are made by actors on a movie set. But this is a movie that we're all part of.

This movie is in a way interactive. We can join in, or we can refuse. For those who join, there is a storybook ending. For those who refuse, there is something worse. Terrible things happen to those who refuse God's offer of forgiveness.

God calls us now to come to him. He calls us to repent of our sins and accept the forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ. If we accept the sacrifice made by the Lamb of God, we can become part of his church. And we will be the bride in the royal wedding at the end of the ages.

If you have never accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; If you have never been forgiven of your sins, come, talk to us. There will be some information on where you can go at the end of this article.

You can come at any time. There are many who have heard the story, but like Israel, they fell away. Some of those people, like Israel, suffer the earthly consequences of a failure to follow God - Broken marriages, broken lives. But, on the day that they come to their senses, on the day that they return, God accepts them. Even if you've been away, it's time to come back.

We want all of our friends, all of our family member, all of the people we care about to be in attendance at the great wedding of the Lamb. Listen to the call of Jesus and come, so you can be part of the greatest love story ever told.