

## The Story of My Life

### Jim Stephens

**Title:** The Story of My Life

**Text:** *You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. (Psalm 139:16 NLT)*

**Thesis:** Life as a story. This is my story. Who's writing your story? What kind of story is it? What kind of book is the story of your life? Depends on the author. Is there a plot? Who chose the characters? Did your parents write the whole book?

Over a period of several years in two countries, I avidly watched a weekly TV Cop Drama show called NYPD Blue. I was drawn into the series because the stories were the stories of the lives of the characters in the show. I watched them change and grow and deal with conflict and illness and tragedy and I got to know them so well – at least my favorite character in the show Andy Sipowicz, a character about my age, who was fat, balding, poorly educated (not that I could relate to him in any way) – I got to know his character so well that I could say some of his lines before he said them.

Eventually, in one of the seasons' episodes (the show ran for 12 years) I began to notice that Andy wasn't reacting and speaking the way I expected in some of the situations he faced. I was confused. What's going on, Andy?

Then I realized what had happened. The show had a new director and some new writers and as a result the stories of my hero's life began to change.

You know, the same thing happened in England with my two favorite shows, "London's Burning" and "Casualty." When the writers changed the stories of my characters changed.

### **When the writer changes, the story changes.**

- Every chapter of the story of your life is written by a team of writers.
- The earliest chapters are probably written mostly by your parents.
- Later chapters may be authored by a favorite teacher, friends, a coach or other influential person.
- Every one of these story-writers is co-authoring with you. You always write part of the story yourself.

Then later on, some people you don't even know may begin to write some of your story.

People in the White House and the Pentagon authored a major chapter of my life in 1966 and 1967. That chapter began with a letter that said, "Greetings from the

President of the United States.” It continued through training at Ft Campbell, KY where my oldest daughter Stephanie was born, then moved to South Vietnam for a year.

At every stage of the story, there were lines written by others and lines written by myself. How I responded to the characters and incidents in the story of my life was as significant as anything else that happened.

I remember standing outside our base camp at Cu Chi in Vietnam, one night just after a tropical storm. Mountains of clouds were piled up on the horizon with lightning flashing in the distance. Cobra helicopters were strafing a suspected enemy outpost less than a mile away and the tracers were slashes of fire across the sky. I stood there in the mud and looked up and said, “God, I believe in you. I believe in you but I want to know if there is more to Christianity than I’ve experienced so far. If there is more, I want to know it.”

More than two years later, after Jean and I had been involved in a small group Bible Study, after I had heard about the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, as the Jesus People movement was beginning to develop, I remembered that night in Vietnam and I knew that that moment had been the key to a new chapter in my story.

Time passed. We sold our business and became part of the leadership of a Jesus People church in Tri-Cities, WA. As we grew and as ministry developed, it fell to Jean and me to oversee and support the efforts of 14 outreach ministries around the northwest, Oregon, Washington, Idaho. We began to travel more widely around the US, Canada, and Jamaica and everywhere we went we were involved with churches – many small struggling churches whose pastors and leaders lived on the edge of discouragement.

We saw so many instances in which we were able to bring encouragement, perspective, hope, that enabled tired and often under-resourced pastors to take a step of faith, to face a difficult situation, to keep on going.

I remember several times during those years saying to God, “If there could be a way to do it, I would gladly give the best and most productive years of my life to serving and encouraging the leaders of small and struggling churches.” I knew (and I suspect that God knew) it was unlikely that I would ever have the independent income to just go and do that. Yet from 1984 to 2000, Jean and I were able to live in the West Indies and then in the UK and travel in Africa and Central America developing Lay Leadership Training Centers and assisting churches.

We came to America at the end of 1999 to rest for a while, near Bend, of all places! We had thought that the next ten years of our lives would be spent in Uganda and Central and East Africa assisting pastors and providing leadership training and resources. However, just one year to the day (By the way, I remember talking with a

minister friend of mine in the early 90's who was taking a six-month sabbatical and thinking "how does a person ever find the time or resources to take a sabbatical?" and here I had just completed a sabbatical and both Jean and I returned from a ministry season in East Africa feeling it was time for a change.)

The evening we returned to Central Oregon from Africa, one year to the day after we had left London, our phone rang and it was Ken Johnson asking me to consider becoming part of the leadership team here at Westside Church. We contacted friends and advisors around the world and in every way God confirmed to us that it was the right thing to do. This began one of the most intense periods of learning, growth, and change we had ever experienced.

Our ministry focus was on small groups, pastoral care, our WC growth track Journey of Discovery. We learned and led and grew in the process, but from time to time would think about our passionate concern for the smaller churches.

In June of this year, Pastor Ken became the District Supervisor for the Cascade District of Foursquare churches. He has the oversight of 42 churches in Central, Southern, Southwestern and Eastern Oregon and Southeastern Idaho. And he asked Jean and me to assist with the administration of the District. So along with the privilege of working with Loomis and Beverly Goode in our WC Compassion Ministries, we are serving and encouraging pastors and churches just like we talked to God about all those years ago.

Let me give you another example of co-writing the story of your life with God. Paul and Cathy Turk have served here at WC for five years, Paul serving as our church administrator and then leading our equipping team. But Paul has begun to develop a passion for pastoring a church. Recently the pastor of our Foursquare Church in Baker City resigned and Pastor Ken and we have the responsibility of finding and appointing a new pastor for the Baker City church. Amazingly, Paul and Cathy's God-given desire and God's amazing plan have co-written a new chapter in the Turk's life. Paul and Cathy and their family, Bethany, Daniel, and Parker are going to be the new pastors of Blue Mountain Foursquare Church in Baker City. **Next Wednesday, September 21, after our NC service we are going to have a reception for them in the Family Room.** You'll be able to talk with them, ask about their plans – maybe God wants some of you to go to Baker City and help them – write a new chapter in your life as well. Also come on Wednesday night prepared to give a financial gift to help them on their way. Just write a check to WC and put Paul & Cathy or Baker City on the check. In fact you can do that anytime up to next weekend.

**Anyway, you see that the story is still being written. The story of my life, the story of Paul and Cathy's life, the story of your life.**

## Let me ask you some Questions about the story of your life:

- What kind of story is the story of your life? Comedy, fantasy, tragedy, adventure, romance, mystery? Other suggestions?
- Who is the author of the story of your life? Different authors write different kinds of stories. John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Barbara Cartland. Can you think of other authors with a distinctive style? I ask this question and look for response. Possible authors of the story of your life:
  - Parents? – the first writers of our story.
    - Who is co-writing the story of your life right now? Is it parents and the things they did to you or didn't do for you?
    - Reaction – Maybe your story is a reaction against what your parents have written. What part does reaction to the things that happen to us and the things that happen around us play? Or maybe just trying to measure up to their expectations. Maybe they wrote a story that you just can't live. You might be a parent yourself and trying with all your might to write a different story for your kids than your parents wrote for you.
    - Is it people who wronged you and still exercise control over you because they can provoke you to anger, resentment, fear, foolishness?
  - Friends? – probably the first co-authors we get to choose.
    - Can you think of other authors for your story? I ask this question and look for response.
    - People you don't even know may be writing your story. You may be trying to be something you're not and deep down don't even want to be. You may spend money you don't have to wear labels and drive status and have stuff because people you don't even know are writing a story for you.
  - Yourself? – I know what I want, I know what's best for me!
  - God? – God has written the story of your life from his perspective. Have you read it yet?
- Who are the main characters in the story of your life? Do you get to choose the characters in your story? In the first few chapters, no. After that, the characters in your story may be mostly of your own choosing. Do you realize that the main characters in your story are also – inevitably – among your co-authors?

*He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (Proverbs 13:20 NIV)*

*Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Corinthians 15:33 NIV)*

- **What is the plot of the story of your life?** Or is your life like Lemony Snicket's "A Series of Unfortunate Events?" No plot, no purpose, no plan, just one thing going wrong after another. You hate to hear the phone ring, check the mail, answer the door.

Maybe it seems like you're just making it up as you go along. It's "Improv" like "Whose Line is It Anyway?"

The story that might have been written about you. You're a loser, you're stupid, you'll never amount to anything. What has God written about you?

*You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. (John 15:16 NLT)*

- **What is the main conflict in the story of your life?** Every story has conflict. Conflict resolved makes a good story. Conflict unresolved leads to unhappy endings.

**Note to me:** Add thoughts about the kinds of conflict we experience.

- **What chapter are you in today in the story of your life?** My story may have a few more chapters than some of your stories. I went to seven schools – seven I can remember – between first and eighth grade and to three high schools. Sometimes I wonder if that's why the longest Jean and I have ever lived in one house in 42 years of marriage is five years – the five years we lived a 90 Cavendish Drive in Leytonstone, East London.
- **Will the story of your life have a happy ending?** It seems like there is no way to answer that one. Yet if the story of your life is authored by God, he is in a position to assure you of a "happily ever after" kind of story.

## **Application:**

God has been writing the story of your life all along, even if you've been living a different version of your story. He's ready to hand you the manuscript and co-author the rest of it with you. It takes a decision on your part.

**I choose God as the co-author of my life.** I make a declaration that I choose God's authorship. **Then I find the things he has written about me – about my life.**

**God authors the general aspects of my story.** He loves me. He has a plan for my life.

*"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11 NLT)*

**God authors the specific details of my story.** Verses for daily reading, the prophecies. Do these become chapter headings?

**God authors the seasonal chapters of my story. – age and stage.**

*9 And now, in my old age, don't set me aside. Don't abandon me when my strength is failing. 17 Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. 18 Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come. (Psalm 71:9, 17-18)*

*I will be your God throughout your lifetime - until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you. (Isaiah 46:4 NLT)*

**God authors the circumstances of the story of my life.**

*9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:9-10 NIV)*

*I will lie down in peace and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, will keep me safe. (Psalm 4:8 NLT)*

## **Are you getting the idea?**

You can learn to truly co-author the story of your life with God. Learn to live and act in the context of his authorship.

*"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter (finisher) of our faith.."* (Hebrews 12:2 NIV)

**Close and response – Let's put our things aside.**

**How real is this?**

- It's as real as you're driving your car and you stop and get out of the driver's seat and you ask Jesus to get in the driver's seat and you say, "Ok, I'm tired and I don't want to crash this car. Will you drive?"
- It's as real as a train traveling on a track and the switch is thrown over and the train moves onto another track and from that point on it is moving toward a new destination.

Is it like as soon as the track switches, you're there? Is it like as soon as Jesus gets in the driver's seat, you're there?

- No, it's way more real than that. It's this real – you are still responsible for every decision you make and every word you speak. But you're on a different track, you've got someone else in charge, and the more you learn to cooperate with him and the more you learn to follow his lead, the better it gets.

Does it mean that there are no steep grades to climb, no more conflicts in your story?

- No, that's fantasy. It's way more real than that.

"It's not too late to change."

- No matter how many layers of blame, excuses, rationalization a person has built up. If you're willing to get to the truth and accept the reality that from this point onward you choose the co-author of your life, it's not too late to change.

*"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter (finisher) of our faith.."*  
(Hebrews 12:2 NIV)

## Response and Prayer

If you want to start a new chapter in the story of your life today – whether you are a believer and have been a believer for a long time or whether you're just making the choice today to cross the line of faith... If you want to make the choice and the declaration that from now on, God is going to be the author of the story of your life... I ask you to pray this prayer with me...

Dear God, I choose today to invite you to write the story of my life.... **Continue to develop this prayer..**

If you prayed this prayer for the first time...