

Broken Heroes: Finding the Gospel in Today's Television, Movies, Books and Music

Dean Storelli
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INTRO: Finding "the story" in today's stories

In this project, I have started not with what the good news "is" but with the stories that society at large seems to be telling itself. Specifically, I have been looking at the **heroes** we are being shown today and how so many of them fit what you might call "broken heroes," men and women like Dr. House (TV: "House"), Jack Bauer (TV: "24"), Brenda Johnson (TV: "The Closer), the protagonist in many of Dick Francis' stories (novels), Bilbo, Frodo and even Aragorn (books and movies based on Tolkein's Lord of the Rings), almost every character on "Lost" (TV) and others. These characters are all deeply flawed but, somehow, still fighting. Often, it seems, the struggle is mixed with the most basic struggle of all, not knowing your own identity: Harry Potter (books and movies), Jason Bourne (books and movies), etc.

And though deeply flawed, and at times even unattractive, their hearts shine through and we embrace them for struggling for us and with us. Somehow, despite their flaws, they are still in the fight, still seeking to "do what's right." We connect with these heroes because even though it seems "nobody does what's right" (Bourne's female partner is shocked when she hears him explain that this is his motivation), the desire to do right is planted deep, it is something we all long for.

Remarkably, Jesus, seems to be a similar kind of hero. He takes on weakness and death but in the end "does right" by us all. He is not flawed like today's TV and movie heroes (he was without sin), but he does understand: 1 Corinthians 13:4 says he was "crucified in weakness," and Hebrews 4:15 claims that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." (For a longer explanation of the role of weakness in Jesus' work, see section 3 below.) His heroics are also more broadly effective – his "doing right" empowers all of us to do right as well. Using a sports analogy, Jesus, like a good basketball player, he makes everyone around him better. Ultimately, his sacrifice helps us to become "broken-Jesus" heroes as well.

It is my belief that all "good" stories, wherever they come from, are good only to the extent that they reflect some elements of the true story God is authoring. A few nights ago I went to bed with a tear in my eye, rereading the 1st Harry Potter book. His story helped me see my story, and more importantly, God's story. This book about a schoolboy coming of age under harsh circumstances captured that spark, that something, that is in all good stories: a sense that there is goodness and beauty and truth.

At the same time, the best stories also capture the pain, the dark, the gigantic, overwhelming forces of evil. These stories make these forces very easy to see, villains that are always selfish, with a constant greed for power, supremely inhuman and arrogant. They are cold and cunning. Skilled and heartless.

Against these, it is almost always the humble or broken heroes in these stories who must do battle. They must learn to be brave in the face of danger, they become fiercely loyal to their friends and are motivated by a willingness to sacrifice for the good of others. They often do not know as much, have as much or number as many as the evil ones, but through heart, passion, companionship and a bit of luck, they fight until they prevail.

Whenever I get a glimpse of any of us moving into this battle, in life or in fiction, my heart swells with pride: I am part of a humble, noble race.

SECTION 1 – An overview from popular culture

Here, I'd like to give a brief overview of a sampling of popular television shows, books and movies. I am avoiding music for a couple of reasons. First, popular music has become a very diverse field. So, for this study, while it would be very easy to find music and lyrics that say the kinds of things I want them to say, I want to avoid this kind of "cherry picking." Second, taking even a brief look at what is on the typical pop radio station or Billboard's "Top 10," has been discouraging. This fall a knowledgeable Duke student gave me three discs of current and emerging popular songs, and among that group, the subject matter was focused almost exclusively on dating and/or breaking up. (Out of 52 songs, over 75% were about these topics.) My suspicion (confirmed by several friends that I have shared these ideas with) is that jumping into other genres would give me a very different picture. From the outside, it looks to me like heavy metal, some veins of country and much of the "alternative" and "indie" music scene is much more diverse in its subject matter and honesty. Interestingly, although more young boys than ever seem to be playing guitar (at least in my neighborhood), they seem to rarely listen to contemporary pop music, preferring instead the "classic" rock-and-roll of the previous decades and contemporary non-mainstream music: some heavy metal and much from the world of independent ("indie") music. It may seem strange to say, but as far as music is concerned, The Eagles, heavy metal and garage bands may be the Kingdom's closest allies. Unfortunately, it is not these bands that dominate the airwaves or are making their way to the top of the charts.

Television, however, is a completely different matter. Gone are the days when prime-time television was almost completely dominated by sex-filled sitcoms. The economics of the television industry are forcing huge changes in what is being produced: consumer access to internet media sources and dvd rentals has made the field much more competitive. New genres are being created and quality is increasing. Among the new offerings, here are a few of my favorites:

"House" – Dr. House is a brilliant diagnostic doctor, drug addict and womanizer. He hates talking with patients and for the most part, they hate speaking to him. His motto:

“everybody lies.” But somehow, underneath the pain, arrogance and apparent disregard, there is a passionate crusader who will not let another human being die.

“**24**” – Everybody around Jack Baur eventually dies, often horribly. Jack has tortured, maimed or kill hundreds. He has been addicted to drugs and alcohol and gets fired and/or arrested regularly by the government he serves. But with a soft voice he agonizes over every loss (briefly) and is a loyal friend, father and servant of his country.

“**Lost**” – Stranded by a plane crash on a deserted island, a group of disconnected strangers struggle and fight each other, the environment and a series of mysterious enemies, all while reliving old hurts and failures. Their biggest challenge: overcoming their own dysfunctional relational styles. Among 20somethings, it is one of TV’s biggest hits.

The **Harry Potter** books and movies – The first, second and fifth movie do a good job of capturing the power of affirmation and the need for friends. The books do a great job of exploring the inner world of a young, flawed hero struggling with his identity and destiny.

SECTION 2 – a composite picture

From these and others, I have tried to pull out common elements and common themes.¹ Here is what I see so far:

Broken heroes - pulling together - against all odds - to save the world.

Broken heroes – not just good people with a few flaws: these are tragically broken people. Dr. House is really a drug addict and is really not fun to be around. Jack Baur’s own daughter tells him that “people like you should not exist.” The x-men (and their TV counterparts in “Heroes”) are literally mutants: their dna has changed, transforming them into people unacceptable to the world.

Pulling together – though designed for relationship, our flaws make the work of getting together almost impossible. Developing community for these people is not a matter of simply getting together, it is work. It takes Harry Potter 7 long novels to truly trust someone. Throughout his adventures, as a reader, you long for him to heal, and rejoice with every small step he takes away from isolation.

Against all odds – in the new popular television series “Heroes,” we are told “there is always a corporation,” always some sinister evil lurking in the background. The characters of “Lost” are constantly harassed by violent, shadowy “others.” Dr. House’s fight is against the much more familiar “heartless administration.”

To save the world – God gave us the mandate to steward and rule, but things have gone too far wrong for that alone to be enough: some saving will also be required. Idealistically, the heroes in these stories are often very conscious that they are working towards this end.

¹ A market research specialist has advised me that this method of research is common. Her job, in fact, is to read blog sites, surf the internet and get a gut feel for current values and ideas.

In a storyboard format, and adding creation and redemption elements, combining these themes might look something like this:

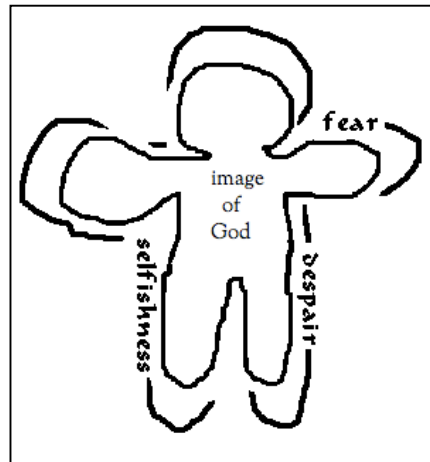
- 1) We were made to be heroes, to work together to care for the world and each other.



- 2) Something has gone terribly wrong. At best, we are now broken heroes. Finding community is not a given: we must work to find each other. There is real danger and real resistance. The world needs to be changed. It needs to be saved.



- 3) Though we are made in the image of God, that image is clouded by our own isolation and brokenness.²

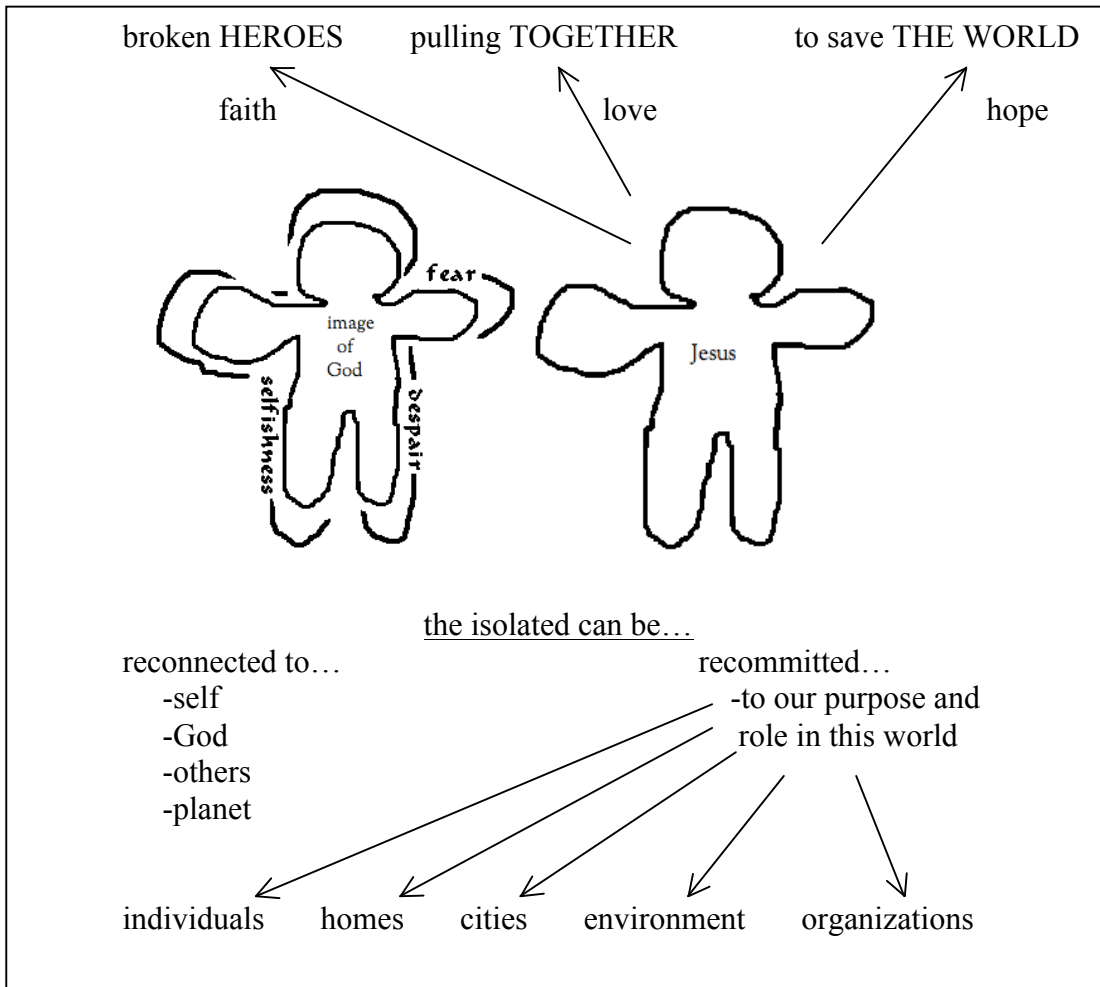


This, I believe, is the story much of society, especially the younger crowd, is listening to. It is the story they expect to hear. It is the story that matches their own sense of their own lives. The popularity of these books, movies and television shows argues that this story is something people are expect and believe to be true, or hope that it is true. Each of these elements is easy to identify in our society. Among many 20s and 30s, recognition of our brokenness is easy to identify. But so is a determination to “save the world.” At least in

² I have borrowed the basic idea of this picture from Chris Mogensen, who first developed it to help share the ideas of the Gospel with college students in France.

part, the green movement is fueled, in my mind, by this generation's drive to "make the world a better place." This month the cover of the very hip magazine, "Outside," listed, besides "finish your first triathlon," "beat your fear of heights" and "ski an expert run," also listed "learn how to save a life" as one of the things we should do this year. Inside is an article on Middle East peace (through surfing) and staying motivated in the fight to make the world a greener place. Regarding community, anybody who is aware of the phenomenon of the television show "Friends" has seen the strong pull that the idea of community has on this generation. These ideas – brokenness, heroic work, finding community, fighting a vast enemy and caring for the world – make sense to this generation and form a story they are hearing and want to believe.

4) What is missing from these stories is the part Jesus plays in restoring us, our cities and our world. While the world's stories identify well the tension points, God's story tells of hope: there is a path to community, forgiveness and a way to care for each other and for our planet.



An alternative story – alternative to both the Gospel and the positive elements of the “broken hero” story, however, is also not too hard to find. While I believe “broken heroes pulling together against all odds to save the world” has currency, apparently (see above discussion on popular music) so does the story of “sex and escape.” For every token of respect given to the broken hero, we can find equal attention being given to the man or woman striving to become the next “American Idol.” Television shows like “Grey’s Anatomy,” “Desperate Housewives,” “Nip and Tuck” and “Dancing with Stars” tell the old story of fame and self-gratification. (Even in the stories I’ve mentioned earlier, this story is interwoven.) Which story will dominate in the end, is what we are all about. By affirming the elements of the world’s “broken hero” story (see below for a discussion of why I think we can), I believe we will win trust and develop ground for sharing the Gospel story.

SECTION 3 – Biblical support for the world’s “broken heroes” story

I don’t believe Jesus ever directly or in one place told the “broken heroes” story that I am outlining, but I believe his actions and teachings, as well as the actions and teachings of his early followers, at least make room for such a story.

Finding Biblical support for at the last element in this story, the “to save the world” part of the story can be done by pushing back to Genesis, where we see God’s first task for humankind captured in the five verbs of 1:28 – “**Be fruitful and multiply and fill** the earth and **subdue** it and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” As David Hegeman explains in Plowing in Hope, God has set us on a course that moves us from a “splendid garden” to a “glorious city.” (p. 32)

“Man was given the task to order, develop and embellish God’s splendid creation, to realize the multifarious potentialities which were embedded within it. All this was commanded before the fall of man into sin. All of this was an integral part of God’s ‘very good’ creation order (Genesis 1:31).” (p. 29)

With the advent of sin, this task has become more complicated but is not superceded. Since the fall, God has asked us to join him in his next task, redemption, but not to the exclusion of this earlier call “to shape God’s creation in line with his good desires” (p. 43). God clearly desires our redemption and reconciliation but also desires our enjoyment and wise stewardship of a world he has invested with many riches. “Saving the world,” then, is exactly what is needed.

In Jesus’ life, we see him calling people back to God and back to God’s purposes for the world and all of life. In his miracles, we see an emphasis not on the simply spectacular but on reconciliation with God PLUS physical healing and restoration,. Instead of lightening flashes and governmental overthrows, he restores a withered hand (Matthew 12:13), he restores sight (Mark 8:25) and he restores ability to the crippled (Matthew 15:31). God’s salvation, these miracles announce, is for all of life.

Regarding the idea of brokenness, Jesus' work of to "restore" implies that there must be some original pattern, something the broken object is restored to. In Luke 5:23-24, Jesus explains that these easy to see miracles help us understand his deeper work of restoring us to what some people call the *imago dei*, the image of God that we were created in but that is now clouded by sin. Included in the restoration of our true selves to this image, the epistles make it clear that Jesus' work is also meant to reconnect us to God and to others. (The theme of "reconciliation" is highlighted in Romans 5, Ephesians 2, Colossians 1 and elsewhere.)

Combining the ideas of brokenness and heroes, the book of Hebrews has some interesting things to say. Exploring the kind of worker God uses in this restoring/reconciling role, the writer argues that it is Christ's weakness that should reassure us as we approach him, explaining that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are" (4:15). Using today's language, we can say that Jesus knows about hopelessness, about being abandoned by friends and family and about being marginalized by society. He has heard the call to despair and has experienced emptiness. He knows what it is like to feel isolated and alone, awkward and cut-off. He has carried shame.

Hebrews 5 paints the picture of a good, humble priest, one who "can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness" (v. 2). The writer explains that Jesus, our priest, was also weak: it was with "with loud cries and tears" that he prayed, knowing well that his life was in the hands of another, that he himself needed to be saved (v. 7). The writer explains that just as a good, earthly priest is humble and therefore sympathetic, "so also" (v. 5) Jesus is humble and gentle with us. Jesus is without sin but not without sympathy, and we are encouraged to approach him as someone who knows what it is like to need help. Hebrews 11 (as well as many other passages) makes it clear that we, God's people, may be called upon to act heroically but should not be surprised to find that work marked by suffering and unfulfilled longing (vv. 32-38).

I will leave unexplored the second two points of this story, the "pulling together" and "against all odds" elements – I believe these are easily supported by a Biblical worldview.

In summary, it seems there is plenty of room within a Biblical framework for a story about God's work with "broken heroes" to fulfill his purposes in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

My goal in this project has not so much been to examine Biblical answers but to help identify connecting points for what the audience might want or be ready for. Personally, my main discovery has been a reaffirmation of the deep meaning of salvation. I was never presented with the cross as simply a "ticket out of hell" but was taught early on about the freedom of a new life in Christ. (In those early days I called it being "saved for" not just "saved from" something.) What I am seeing in the New Testament (1 John, Ephesians, Galatians, Romans, Colossians) is not a retreat from the idea of the cross but an affirmation of its meaning for all of life. Instead of salvation being narrowly defined in its scope (i.e. it

solves “spiritual” problems only) and as an escape from life, I am impressed by how broad and free a redeemed life is. Even though still in many ways broken, I can resume God’s original purposes for my life in this world – as one of its stewards – and have even greater hope for the next!

Regarding culture, this study has strengthened several convictions: 1) that God is alive and active in the world, sending blessings on everyone; 2) that the image of God is discernable in every human life; and 3) that the Kingdom of God is easy to spot as we go through everyday life. It has taken some retraining of my habits to learn to recognize the heart and values of the Kingdom around me, but it has been a very rewarding journey.

There are several topics that this paper bring into focus as needing more study and reflection.

- 1) If God has invested so much of the Kingdom into the world around us, even among those who do not acknowledge him, what does this say about the dignity and necessity of work? Recently, there has been much talk about escaping from a “religious” mindset. But it seems to me that we need to go further: we need to escape from an equally dangerous “spiritual vs secular” mindset. Already, I have seen “Christian” vs “Christ follower” skits online, modeled after the popular PC vs Mac commercials. If all we have done is escape from the restrictive forms of religion into an exciting, new, but ultimately narrow form of non-religious “spirituality,” then I believe we will still be left out of all God has for us.
- 2) Following some of the US election process this year has lead me to conclude that we need to better understand the great challenge and opportunities that politics has for us. We have made many mistakes over many years in this area and need to discover how the Kingdom of God best co-exists and influences the kingdoms of this world. Borrowing from Dick Fischer, I think we need to answer:

Is there a particular “spiritual” way to bring about God’s kingdom results (e.g. shalom, justice, peace) or are its citizens to use the established change agents of our culture to effect change (e.g. political, educational, media)? Will God’s results be brought about, primarily:

- through being preached?
- through spiritual warfare prayer?
- or through Christian individual acts of godliness?
- or through efforts of the church as community?
- or through Christian insiders’ involvement in the political process, like Wilberforce?
- or will God just bring this all about in his time and in his way, without reference to what the citizens of the kingdom pray, do or care about?
- or...?

- 3) A very attractive part of “saving the world” for many is the social justice and racial diversity component. Unless we are willing to tackle these topics, I think much of the younger generation will leave us behind.