FINDING YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY

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"We have come from God and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God."

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-J.R.R. Colkien

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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INTRODUCTION

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Before You Begin Your Journey

Come with us on a journey. The road we will travel is not just a nature trail. Our adventure is nothing less than the greatest story ever told, and you—yes, you—are a part of it. As with all journeys, you never know what you will encounter along the way. There will be moments of excitement, perseverance, and self-discovery. Some days you might want to quit; other times you won't be able to press on fast enough. That's the nature of journeys; it's what makes completing them so rewarding. Journeys change people. They transform the most unlikely characters into heroes. And this journey has the potential to change you, too. Are you ready?

What Is the "Hero's Journey"?

Years ago, a man named Joseph Campbell developed a famous theory that all stories across all cultures are just reflections (in part or full) of one universal story: the hero's journey. You may not have heard of it, but you've almost certainly encountered it before. Probably many times. The story goes like this: Unlikely characters receive a call to leave their familiar home and enter a strange new world filled with danger and potential reward. Along the way, they meet wise mentors and faithful allies. They overcome obstacles that shape them into the people they need to be to achieve victory for themselves and the world around them. Finally, they return home from the journey, no longer the same people they were when they left. They've become heroes.²

Characters such as Frodo Baggins, Mulan, Luke Skywalker, Dorothy (from the *Wizard of Oz*), Iron Man, Harry Potter, Cinderella, Sherlock Holmes, Simba, Moana, and countless others have embarked on different versions of this epic adventure.

The Journey Ahead

Despite what some people believe, the Bible is not just a boring book about things that happened a long time ago or an ancient rulebook we must try to follow. Neither is it a fairytale containing good moral lessons. The reality of the Christian faith is far more thrilling.

The Bible is an exciting, unified story about a real God and real people. It describes where we came from, what went wrong, and how God fixed it. It is an account of how God used a collection of ordinary men and women to start a movement that—despite opposition—spread around the world. It is a narrative of good and evil, companionship, betrayal, violence, romance, and supernatural encounters. It is the greatest story ever told—and you are one of the characters.

An Important Distinction

While you most certainly are on a journey, you are not the hero of your story—that role is reserved for Jesus alone. He is the one who gave His life so we might live. Apart from Him, we can do nothing (see John 15:5). However, in this book we will use the framework of the hero's journey to reveal the path Jesus has you on and how He can continue to shape you as you follow Him.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Over the next fifty-eight days, we want to explore this story with you and help you discover your place in it. Each day is divided into three unique sections:

EXPLORE: How is the hero's journey reflected in the Bible?

DISCOVER: How does this journey reveal your place in that story?

ACT: How can you put these biblical truths into practice?

Journeys are unpredictable. The road will be long and winding. If you fall behind, don't give up. If you miss days, don't grow discouraged— simply pick up where you left off. The primary goal is to finish the journey, no matter what detours you take along the way.

At various stages, you will pause to rest and look back on how far you've come. The end of each section contains a special video message from us that will encourage and help you to complete your own character profile. This activity is also available for download at: lifeway.com/godheroesdragons.

The character profile is designed to provide a summary of your journey. It will allow you to look back on what you have learned so you can continue to move forward to new adventures.

Your life is part of a bigger story. Are you ready to travel together? The road ahead beckons, and your hero's journey awaits . . .

HOW TO WATCH THE VIDEOS

This Bible study has ten free videos that complement the content and launch discussion. You can stream the video teaching sessions any time by going to **lifeway.com/godheroesdragons** or watch them via the Lifeway On Demand app on any Smart TV or mobile device.



From the app there are several ways to find our student studies:

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QUESTIONS? WE HAVE ANSWERS!

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Day 1

PROLOGUE: YOUR LIFE AS A STORY

I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. — Revelation 20:12

EXPLORE

e all love a good story.

Humans have been sharing stories for a long time. Ancient cave paintings depicted feats of bravery and victory. These tales were recited around campfires and passed down through

generations. Written language allowed people to tell even more stories and, with the invention of the printing press, to preserve them in books. The oldest known written narrative is called *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (2100–1200 BC), which includes many of the same themes and plot elements found in later stories, such as an account of a "great flood." These days, the most prevalent forms of storytelling are film, television, social media, and video games. Technology has changed, but humans continue to tell stories.

Stories are powerful. People have always used narratives as a way to understand their place in the world. But our fascination with storytelling goes even deeper. Did you know that psychologists have discovered that people view their life largely in terms of an unfolding story? For instance, after a big decision, we say things like, "I'm excited for the next chapter," or "I'm closing the book on that relationship."

PROLOGUE

Life is a journey, and the story of your life will be written according to what you do along the way. Here's an exciting reality: Whether you realize it or not, you are in the middle of an amazing story that is playing out all around you. God has been telling this tale since the beginning of time, and it will continue long after the curtain has closed on your own time on earth. Have you ever thought about life like that? We will only discover our true identity and purpose by understanding ourselves in the context of God's incredible story.

At one point in the Bible, Hagar, a runaway slave who suffered unjust treatment, found herself in the middle of a desert, feeling alone and hopeless. While she was there, an angel appeared to her and asked two important questions: "Where have you come from and where are you going?" (Gen. 16:8). Through the angel, Hagar discovered that her life wasn't meaningless. It was a journey, and her story wasn't over yet. God knew her and had a plan for her life.

The same is true for you. Wherever you currently find yourself, you have come from somewhere, and you have a path ahead of you. Life is a journey, and the story of your life will be written according to what you do along the way.

The last book of the Bible includes a fascinating picture. The author of Revelation describes a great vision he received from God. In it, he sees a "book of life" in heaven, as well as other open books. The stories of each person's life are written on the pages of these heavenly books. One day, all of us will give an account to God for the deeds recorded in those books (see Rev. 20:12).

Your life story is unfolding. As Samwise Gamgee asked Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?" ³ Great question. Let's embark on this journey and find out together.

DISCOVER

The angel asked Hagar two simple questions: "Where have you come from?" and "Where are you going?" How would you respond if someone asked you those questions?

АСТ

As you begin the journey through this book, pray this prayer: *God, thank You* for creating me and caring about the direction of my life. Thank You for allowing me to be part of the bigger story that You are telling in the world. Please guide me in this journey. Teach me through the verses I read in the Bible and the ideas I encounter in this book. In all of it, help me come to know You better than I did before. Amen.



Scan the QR code on the left or visit **lifeway.com/godheroesdragons** to watch the video for the Introduction.

PART 1: CFGE SCORYCELLER

Day 2

STORIES NEED STORYTELLERS

And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. — Hebrews 5:9 (KJV)

EXPLORE

tories require a storyteller.

Several years ago, an experiment was conducted with the amusing goal of trying to get monkeys to write Shakespeare. Six Sulawesi crested macaques were put in a room with a typewriter. Things didn't go well. The experiment was canceled after a month with the following results: "The monkeys produced five pages of text, mainly composed of the letter S . . . broke the computer and used the keyboard as a lavatory."¹ It seems Shakespeare's legacy is preserved!

No amount of random banging on a keyboard will ever produce a thrilling novel. Likewise, without an author, life would merely be a chaotic series of isolated events. Only if a masterful storyteller weaves events into a unified tale do they take on meaning. Life is a story, and thankfully, the story has an Author.

God is the divine Storyteller. When God inspired the special revelation of the Bible, He didn't give a detailed instruction manual or Theology 101 textbook. Instead, the Bible took the form of a collection of stories: roughly forty percent of the Bible is written in narrative form. When Jesus came to earth, He further displayed God's storytelling nature by spending much of His short ministry traveling around and telling captivating stories (see Matt. 13:34). More than two thousand years later, those stories (such as His parables of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son) remain some of the most famous tales ever told. One of God's preferred methods of communication is through storytelling.

The purpose of these biblical narratives is to point to God as the Author of an even bigger story, one that began at creation and continues today. If life itself is to be understood as a story, and not just a series of random events, then the Bible is God's declaration that He is the Storyteller: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26). God is the Author of life itself. He weaves history together according to His designs.

The Bible also reveals Jesus as "the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (see Heb. 5:9 KJV). Everything Jesus taught points to the bigger narrative of salvation. He didn't simply tell stories about life; He *is* the Author of eternal life. From the beginning right up to now, God has been unfolding the story of our salvation.

Great storytellers earn our trust. We pre-order new books from our favorite authors because we know they will be good. Acclaimed directors like Christopher Nolan and Jordan Peele often don't reveal any information about

a film's plot in the trailers. Audiences flock to the theater on opening night because they trust the storytellers behind the camera. Since your life is an unfolding story, then the most important information for you to know is the Author.

Thankfully, the story of what came before and what continues to unfold all around us is not without purpose. God is the great Storyteller, and you can trust Him to continue to unfold His grand narrative in your life. From the beginning right up to now, God has been unfolding the story of our salvation.

DISCOVER

Why do you think God chose to use stories to communicate with us? In what ways do stories teach us truth differently than a more straightforward "instruction manual" would?

Do you trust God as the storyteller of your life? Why or why not?

ACT

Keep this prayer in your mind today: *God, help me see the bigger story that You are telling as it unfolds around me. Please help me to trust You as the Author of my story. Amen.*

PART 1: THE STORYTELLER

Day 3

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. — Genesis 1:1

EXPLORE

eginnings are important. The opening of a story acts as a hook to draw people in. Famous examples include, "Once upon a time," "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,"² "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,"³ and "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."⁴ There are many great examples, but the most captivating opening line ever written belongs to the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

These words set the stage for everything else that would unfold. They establish the theme of God's relationship with His creation. God is eternal, which means He has always existed. So the "beginning" does not refer to God's beginning but to the start of the grand story He is weaving. Genesis 1:2 tells us, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep" (ESV). This implies that the universe was a blank page, full of possibilities. Then God spoke, and everything changed (see Gen. 1:3). This is the "once upon a time" moment in which the greatest story ever told was set into motion.

What does this story's introduction tell us about its Author? The first characteristic the Bible reveals about God is that He is a creative being and that His creation is "good" (see Gen. 1:4). He is powerful enough to bring the universe into existence from nothing. He is also intentional. God didn't need to create the universe. He wanted to. His actions were intentional and purposeful.

Understanding your role in the story begins with coming to know your Creator. Have you ever looked at the breathtaking photos of space captured by the world's most powerful telescopes? The images are filled with bright lights, and each light is actually an entire galaxy that human eyes may never fully see. If you were to take a picture of a section of the night sky the size of a grain of sand and then enlarge it, you would see countless galaxies. It's mind-boggling. What possible meaning could

your life have in such a vast expanse?

In the grand scope of the universe, we're very small. Yet the same God who created everything is directing your story. Like a polished diamond ring, small things crafted with precision hold immense value. The universe, and our place in it, wasn't an accident. It came into being because God wanted it to. Understanding your role in the story begins with coming to know your Creator.

The apostle Paul wrote that "[God's] invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made" (Rom. 1:20). All of creation points to its Creator—to *your* Creator. Every time you look at the beauty of creation, know that the One who made it all has a purpose for your life. The more you come to know the Author, the better you will understand your place within His unfolding story.

PART 1: THE STORYTELLER

DISCOVER

As humans, we tend to be self-centered. Why is it important to start with God rather than with ourselves to understand our own stories?

Everything that exists was created by God. When you look at creation, what does it tell you about who God is as the Creator?

ACT

As you go throughout your day today, observe the beauty of God's creation around you. Take a few minutes to walk outside and appreciate nature. Keep this prayer in mind: *God, thank You for Your wonderful creation. Help me to learn more of who You are by what You have made. Amen.*

Day 4

AN ACTIVE STORYTELLER

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created.... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. — John 1:1-3,14

EXPLORE

he advancement in artificial intelligence (AI) technology has led to some interesting results. One fascinating area of experimentation is storytelling. Computer programmers set the parameters, and then an algorithm spits out a new story. These AI creations have included new books in popular series, such as an eighth Harry Potter novel (outlandishly titled *Harry Potter and the Portrait of What Looked Like a Large Pile of Ash*) and even stories written by authors who've been dead for hundreds of years. While amusing, the content of these computer-generated stories is bizarre and nonsensical, suggesting we don't need to fret about AI taking over the world just yet!

Throughout history, people have often believed God operates like those computer programmers. In this perspective, God (or some other higher power) started the algorithm for creation and then abandoned it to run its course without any further involvement from Him. Have you ever thought of God that way? You may look at the world and conclude that it was created, but the idea that the Creator remains actively involved in its progress seems difficult to fathom.

PART 1: THE STORYTELLER

God remains active in the world, continuing to direct things toward His desired ends. The Bible reveals that God is not just a distant computer programmer. He not only created the universe, but also, "in him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28 NLT). God started the story "in the beginning" (Gen. 1:1), but He remains actively involved as it unfolds. As Jesus said, "My Father is still working, and I am working also" (John 5:17).

In the opening of the Gospel of John,

readers are taken back to the beginning of creation. Christians tend to think Jesus doesn't enter the story until Christmas morning, but John reminds us that Jesus wasn't just present at creation—He was the central figure! "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3).

God is the Creator, but He didn't stop there. He went one step further. The Author of the story stepped into creation in the person of Jesus: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Not only is God still involved in telling the story He began, but like many famous creators and storytellers—from Alfred Hitchcock to Stan Lee to John Favraeu—He stepped inside the tale and became a character. But unlike these Hollywood directors, God's role in His story is no mere cameo or "Easter egg." It's the pivotal moment of the narrative.

God is not the creator just because of a one-off act at the beginning of time. He remains active in the world, continuing to direct things toward His desired ends. When we call God the Creator, we are not only describing what He did but about who He is. He isn't distant, and He hasn't abandoned His story. He has been actively involved from the beginning, and He remains so to this day.

DISCOVER

Why does it matter that God personally entered the story as opposed to directing it solely from the outside?

How does it change the way you live if you understand that the same God who created the universe is actively at work in your life?

ACT

As you go throughout your day today, keep this prayer in mind: *God, thank You for not abandoning Your creation. Help me to see Your activity all around me. Amen.*

Day 5

A CAST OF CHARACTERS

Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began. — Psalm 139:16

EXPLORE

tories often rise or fall depending on the quality of the characters. Great authors create compelling and memorable personalities, and the most ambitious stories often include a large cast. *War and Peace*, the Russian classic by Leo Tolstoy, contains 580 characters.⁵ When it comes to book series, the total can be even more overwhelming. The *Harry Potter* series contains more than 700 named characters,⁶ the *Song of Ice and Fire* books have more than 2000,⁷ and Robert Jordan's fifteen-book fantasy epic, *The Wheel of Time*, boasts a staggering 2,782 named characters.⁸ Series with broad casts often include a glossary at the back of the book just to help readers keep track of who is who!

Believe it or not, the story God is telling is even more expansive. It's filled with an almost incomprehensible number of characters. Did you know there are more than eight billion people in the world today? God is telling an expansive story with an unfathomable number of characters—and you are one of them.

As avid readers know, stories with lots of characters can often be frustrating. Sometimes it seems like our favorite minor characters get forgotten or written out of the story. Even the most talented human authors can only balance so many simultaneous storylines and subplots. But God—as an infinite and eternal being—has no such limit. None of the characters in God's story

were created on a whim, nor does He lose interest or forget about them. Each one was created for an important role. Before each person entered the tale, his or her story was written down in a heavenly book (see Ps. 139:16).

The author of Psalm 139 was most likely David. The Bible tells us he was a shepherd with seven older brothers (see 1 Sam. 16:10-11). Working alone in a field of sheep, the youngest child of eight, he likely felt insignificant. But before he was even born, God had a story to tell with his life. This overlooked shepherd boy would become a giant-slayer and a king (not to mention a prolific songwriter!). Others may have forgotten David out in that field among the sheep, but God didn't.

God is telling an expansive story with an unfathomable number of characters—and you are one of them. The prophet Jeremiah experienced the same assurance from God: "I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). The young prophet had his doubts, but God was confident in the story He would tell through Jeremiah's life (see Jer. 1:6-10).

Your own story may not involve battling giants, ruling a kingdom, or speaking God's words to an entire nation, but the same Storyteller desires to be the Author of your life. He sees you and knows you. You are perfectly cast in the role He has for you.

PART 1: THE STORYTELLER

DISCOVER

Have you ever felt insignificant in a world of more than eight billion people? How do you see yourself differently when you realize God knows you and loves you?

If you believe it's true that God has a plan for your life, how will you approach each day?

ACT

As you go throughout your day today, keep this prayer in mind: *God, thank You for giving me life. Thank You for calling me into the story You want to tell through my life. Help me to understand the role I play in this story and to give it everything I have as I follow Your lead. Amen.*

Day 6

IN CONTROL OF THE STORY

We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. — Romans 8:28

EXPLORE

here is a scene in Steven Spielberg's classic adventure movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in which roguish archaeologist adventurer Indiana Jones declares he is going to chase down the army of bad guys and retrieve the stolen artifact. When his dumbfounded friend asks how, Indy mutters, "I don't know. I'm making this up as I go." ⁹

Christians sometimes imagine God works that way. We picture Him shrugging and saying, "I'm making this up as I go" as He scrambles in heaven to keep up with the craziness of our world. When we encounter unforeseen trials and difficult circumstances, we may assume God was caught off guard just like we were.

Fortunately, the Bible doesn't describe God that way. He doesn't get writer's block. Even though the journey is filled with unexpected plot twists that can be difficult to make sense of when we're right in the middle of the action, the Author remains fully in control of His story. God is moving "all things" to His desired end, and that end is "good [for] those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). We may not see where the story is headed, but God does.

Mark 4:35-41 tells the thrilling story of a time when Jesus and His disciples were caught up in a deadly storm while sailing across the Sea of Galilee. The disciples panicked and rushed to wake Jesus, who had been peacefully sleeping through the whole thing! With just a few words, Jesus

calmed the storm, leaving the shocked disciples to ask, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!" (Mark 4:41).

The best stories often include moments of despair over seemingly insurmountable obstacles. For the characters within the tale, the end may appear bleak and hopeless. Yet for the author who stands outside the story and knows the ending, these perilous moments are opportunities to develop the characters and set them up for miraculous, future victories.

In the *The Two Towers*, the second novel in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo and Sam try to make sense of the hazardous circumstances around them by remembering the famous heroes in their favorite stories: "We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what

When your story takes an unexpected twist, take comfort in knowing that God is not caught by surprise. folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end . . . And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is . . . but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to."¹⁰ As we live our lives, we don't always know what will happen around the next corner. Thankfully there is someone who always does.

When your story takes an unexpected twist, take comfort in knowing that God is not caught by surprise. He knew what was coming and has

been preparing you for precisely that moment. The Author of your story knows what you will face tomorrow, which is why He invites you to trust Him today.

DISCOVER

In what ways does experiencing difficult situations in life impact your view of God?

How could Jesus remain so calm in the face of such a terrifying storm? How does this story encourage you to face whatever storms might lay ahead of you?

ACT

Think of someone in your life (such as a friend or family member) who might be going through a difficult "storm" right now. Call, text, or message that person today to offer encouragement, perhaps pointing to Mark 4:35-41 for comfort. Take a minute right now to pray for that person.

Day 7

GOD IS A BETTER STORYTELLER THAN WE ARE

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." This is the LORD's declaration. — Isaiah 55:8

EXPLORE

hen we watch movies or read books, we typically associate ourselves with the heroes. The protagonist is meant to be our "window" into the story. Not many viewers think, "Man, I really relate to this Thanos guy" (but if you do find yourself wanting to erase half the universe with some Infinity Stones, please seek immediate help!). It's also a natural human desire to seek the director's spot in our own story. Not

only do we want to be the hero; we also want to determine what our story should be. In short, we want to call the shots.

This desire for control is the oldest human problem. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit because they wanted to gain wisdom and "be like God" (see Gen. 3:5-6). God had an amazing purpose for Adam and Eve, but they wanted to direct their own tale. They forgot who was meant to be the director and who was meant to be the cast. A promising story in a beautiful garden paradise quickly became a tragedy filled with shame and suffering. They thought they could Every time we try to kick God out of the "director's chair" of our lives, we're settling for something far less than what we could be experiencing.

do God's job as well as He could. The next chapters in their story reveal how wrong they were.

God's desire to be the Author of the story isn't because He is controlling or petty. He loves us, and He is a better storyteller than we are. He stands outside the narrative and can see everything that led us to where we are today. He knows everything that awaits us on the path ahead. He knows which road will lead to our most satisfying and impactful life.

Years ago, a series of books called *Choose Your Own Adventure* hit the scene. Every few pages, readers were confronted with a set of choices for what the characters should do next. Depending on what readers chose, they would flip to a certain page, and the story would continue with the consequences of that decision. Choose wisely, and the character would achieve victory. Choose poorly, and the protagonist would be dead after just a few chapters!

You may have heard of these books, but you might have never read one. The genre turned out to be a short-lived fad. Netflix and other streaming platforms have occasionally attempted to revitalize the concept, but it hasn't caught on with audiences. Why? While it sounds exciting to direct the story, making countless "wrong choices" and constantly backtracking quickly becomes exhausting. It doesn't compare to the experience of being immersed in a thrilling story told by a master storyteller. Directors like Ridley Scott, James Cameron, Kathryn Bigelow, or Tim Burton know how to guide a story better than we do. It's better for us to get out of the director's chair and enjoy the ride as they work their cinematic magic.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours (see Isa. 55:8-9). In other words, our best ideas will never compare to God's best. Every time we try to kick God out of the "director's chair" of our lives, we're settling for something far less than what we could be experiencing. Will you live according to your own thoughts and ways, or will you surrender to God's power and wisdom?

PART 1: THE STORYTELLER

DISCOVER

Do you believe God is a better storyteller than you are? Why or why not?

Why are we so tempted to be the gods of our own lives? What is one thing right now that you are struggling to entrust to God?

ACT

Pray the following prayer throughout your day: *God, I want to trust You more. Please help me let go of my desire to be god of my own life. I surrender control to You. Amen.*

Day 8

WAY STATION

In most journey stories, the weary travelers require stops along the road, perhaps at an inn with a warm fire and a hot meal, or in a peaceful glade, or at a protected castle. Whatever form these moments take, they enable the heroes to catch their breath, refresh, and look back on how far they have traveled.

You have reached the first way station on your journey through this book. There will be similar stops at the end of each section. We encourage you not to skip these moments.

WATCH



Scan the QR code or go to lifeway.com/godheroesdragons to watch the video for Part 1: The Storyteller.

