



# STORYING

How and Why we Use  
Biblical Storytelling for  
Discipleship

by Paula & Tom  
Graves

# **Storying: How and Why we Use Biblical Storytelling for Discipleship**

By Paula and Tom Graves

Light of Christ Publishing  
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Thank you to our congregation who have been willing participants in storying.

You have very patient as Tom and I learned and refined  
our methodology to fit your needs.

## **How to Use this Book:**

This book is based on our research and experience with Biblical storying. You will notice that the pronouns will toggle between singular and plural. I, Paula, was more interested in research around storying. I had to develop an independent study class for my seminary degree and choose to do it on Biblical Storying. That initiated my study, but it grew from there. Tom is much more focused on the practical. He would take what I learned and put it into practice.

Thus, when you see the personal pronouns, it is something that Paula has done. When the plural pronouns are used, it is something that both Paula and Tom have done together.

This book is in three sections, the first part is two stories. The first our personal story and the second is a fictional story that encompasses much of our experience and learning.

The second part of the book contains the details of the process that we use. I have attempted to give all our sources credit, thus there are many footnotes. There is also a list of helpful books at the end of this section.

The third part of the book contains a sample of a story set that we used at Light of Christ. It is included to help the reader understand the process.

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# Part 1 – Two Stories

## Our Story about Story

My husband Tom and I founded our church plant with the vision to be a discipling church. With that in mind, we spent thousands of dollars to train ourselves and our leaders with a nationally known discipling program. While this program was based on Godly principles, it contained very little Scripture. It was difficult to teach, and without the Living Word, our disciple groups struggled. So, we changed to another program that had been very successful in a friend's church. It was Scripture rich but as we began to use it, we again discovered it was difficult to teach and reproduce. We did not have the same teaching giftings as our friend. This second program did, however, show us the need to make the Scriptures more accessible to our congregation.

Tom and I had grown up with the stories of the Bible. We both have fond memories of listening to the Bible stories as we sat on our mothers' lap. We both had faithfully attended Sunday school and Vacation Bible School and heard many of these stories repeated. We assumed others also knew these stories. After struggling with two different discipleship programs, we realized that many in our groups did not know as many of the stories as we had assumed they knew. They would smile and nod as we spoke of a Bible story but when we questioned them, they knew few if any details.

Even more distressing was that they did not realize that all the stories of the Bible fit together to tell a bigger story. They had no idea if Abraham lived before or after David, or if Eve could have spoken with Isaiah. We come from a church heritage that followed the lectionary system. The pastors usually preached on the Gospels, occasionally on an Epistle lesson but rarely outside of the New Testament. Hence, the people had little knowledge of the Old Testament. Some had tried to read the Bible through, but most stopped due to frustration. They couldn't understand how it all fit together, and it didn't seem to make any sense chronologically. Many attended Bible study through the years but were satisfied to have the pastor spoon feed them.

It was at this time Tom suggested that we explore Biblical storytelling. I had just finished my first year of seminary and had worked hard in my Bible exegesis class. Storytelling sounded like the dumbest idea I had ever heard. It sounded like a step backwards and we needed to go forward. But, since I did not have any better ideas for discipling our people, I agreed to go.

When I experienced the Bible storytelling group, I found it to a profound time of revelation from Scripture. The story was of the Prodigal Son which I had read many times and thought I knew well. This session was different, the group saw new insight and opened themselves up to God in a way I had never experienced. I realized that maybe this whole storytelling thing wasn't so dumb after all. On the contrary, it was amazing.

In this session the Bible text was simply told as a story. Then the group members were guided by the leader to recount the story in a chronological manner. The text was read, and questions were asked. The leader did not teach but simply facilitated by asking questions. These questions were different than other Bible studies I had done. They were designed to make each of us think about the story and God and how this story would apply to our lives.

Tom and I wanted to bring this type of learning to our church community, but we were not sure if we could replicate it. We purchased story sets and began the adventure of Biblical storytelling. After the first year, we understood the process much better. The canned series were beginning to chafe and feel constricting. We felt the need to develop our own story series to fit the needs of our community.

Fast forward several years, our church now uses chronological Biblical storytelling for Sunday school, sermons, and small groups. It is not the magic bullet nor the only teaching methodology, but it has been a very helpful structure to provide spiritual growth for our congregation. It is easy to reproduce, and we can reach more people because lay leaders, not just the pastors, can lead a group.

We also have been able to use it to reach into the community. We have been able to take this to small groups in places of businesses. The owners of these businesses have invited us in to help them reach their workers with the Gospel. In the beginning, most of the people in these groups consisted of non-believers or

those who previously thought the church had nothing to offer. Biblical storytelling is a non-confrontational way to convey God's truth and to provide connections to a world starved for authentic relationship. Slowly, the participants in these groups have drawn closer to God. We have been able to baptize several individuals.

We are excited about the difference storytelling has made in our own lives. We think differently about God. This methodology has allowed our congregation to grow spiritually. The small group time gives space to hear what God is saying to each individual. Once they have heard God speak there, it is easier to hear God speak in their everyday lives. Hearing the Bible story uses a different part of the brain than reading the story. We have found that after hearing the story, most begin to read the Bible more because they hear something they never saw before.

As we stumbled upon this method of teaching and discipling, I began to research how others used story. I am a product of traditional learning and had broken everything about story down into categories. This is important, but I'm trying to teach about how to use story, so why not use a story? With that thought, I had many things run through my mind. We had lots of conversation with other pastors and instructors. Some had positive reactions to storying, others had negative reactions with a few very negative responses.

The following story is fictional, as are the characters. Each of these three characters are a composite of many people in our history. Even though it is fictional, it represents much of what has happened as we have begun using storytelling.

## A Story about Story

### I - The Coffee Shop

Josie smiled at the barista as she grabbed her latte. The smile was more polite than genuine. Last night had not gone well and she was hoping that the caffeine would make her feel better. She had been on the job for almost a month now as youth director at St. Timothy's Lutheran. The church had a long history in town, but also wanted to update their traditional style to appeal to the younger generation. That was why they had brought Josie on staff; she was to reach out to the youth.

She was deep in thought as she turned to sit down and almost ran into Gary, who was also getting a coffee. Gary was the youngest member of the elder board at St. Timothy's and worked at an expanding chain of gas stations, Gas N More.

"Hey, Josie, how are things going? Getting settled in on the job?" Gary smiled as he asked.

"Oh, Gary," Josie replied as she recognized him. "I am beginning to get acquainted, and just starting to see how big this job really is."

"How did youth group go last night?" Gary asked. "I know Pastor Larson and quite frankly the whole elder board has great expectations for you."

Josie nodded, "I know, but last night was pretty discouraging. The Bible is supposed to be the Living Word, but somewhere along the way, it seems like we killed it. The lesson really felt dead last night."

"Sorry, to hear that, Josie," Gary replied. "What seems to be the matter? I have a few minutes before I need to get back to work. Let's just sit in the back."

As they walked to the easy chairs in the corner, Josie asked, "Why are you getting coffee here? I thought Gas N More just added an espresso machine."

"We did, we did," laughed Gary. "Just checking out the competition. We are doing some comparison studies to make sure we stay in the running. Tell me about last night."

Josie began, "I know teenagers always seem to be in the midst of a hormone cloud, but I don't think they were there to hear anything from God last night. They could have cared less about the devotion and even the activity was less exciting than the past couple weeks. I guess they get bored easily."

“What have you’ve been doing with the teens the past few weeks?” asked Gary.

“I’ve been trying to have something fun to get them to come and then do a short Bible study on some topic that would apply to them. But the bait and switch doesn’t seem to be working,” bemoaned Josie.

“Yeah, “bait and switch” is tricky. Just like having people fill their cars with gas and hope they will come in and buy an expresso. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Have you tried story?” Gary asked.

“Story?! These are teenagers not preschoolers,” countered Josie.

“I know, I know, let me explain a bit more. I just got my MBA degree,” started Gary.

“Congratulations, I didn’t know that,” interrupted Josie.

“Thanks. One of the classes I had to take was a marketing class, and it was all about story,” replied Gary.

“But what does story have to do with marketing?” asked Josie.

“Everything. The big new way to sell your product is to have a story about it,” Gary said.

“What do you mean?” asked Josie.

“Let me give you an example,” replied Gary. “There is a beer company whose commercials consist of a story about big horses and a puppy. What does drinking beer have to do with horses and puppies?”

“Oh, I think I know what you are talking about,” said Josie. “I loved those commercials because they were so cute.”

“Exactly. There is a whole science about how story affects the brain. We had to read a book in the marketing class that explained how story affects the brain and affects how you act. And story is really powerful. Let me give you an example. I was still in that marketing class and had a paper to finish. My then three-year-old wanted to go to story time at the library. I knew it would be an hour there because they tell a story and then do a craft. I thought I’d just take my laptop and work while my son listened to the story. I had everything set up and had started to work on my paper when the story caught my attention. I paused what I was doing and listened because I wanted to know if Duckyboo could become friends with Benny Bunny. I hadn’t even realized that I had stopped working until the librarian gave me a little smirky smile. She could see I was listening, in spite of myself. Here I was a graduate student caught up in a story for preschoolers.”

“Yeah, that would be a bit humbling,” laughed Josie.

“It was, but it really pointed out how engaging a story is,” said Gary.

“So how do you use story at Gas N More?” questioned Josie.

“Our marketing story is that we want to make something that is a chore, a pleasure. You need to get gas so your car will run. You are busy but if you stop at Gas N More, you can get basic grocery needs and skip the stop at the grocery store. You can treat yourself to coffee and donuts or cookies. If you’re a vegan, we even have something for you. And, all of this in a clean, friendly atmosphere,” explained Gary.

“Clean. Clean is great. There are certain chains of gas stations, that I avoid because the restrooms are always filthy,” said Josie.

“I could have used you for training!” exclaimed Gary.

“What do you mean?” asked Josie.

“For the story to hold true for Gas N More, we need our staff to make this happen. First, we tried just giving everyone the rules, but people just seemed to dodge around them. Then I thought, since I’m trying to create a story for my customers, why not teach my staff with story? So, we began to use real customer’s stories to help our staff see how important their actions were. These stories modeled how good customer service could make a difference. As a bonus, we found that the staff began to function more like a team and had more pride in their work.” Said Gary.<sup>1</sup>

“That’s amazing,” replied Josie.

“Yes, and what is even more amazing is that we’ve been able to use story to reach out to our staff with the Gospel. The owner of Gas N More is a Christian and wants to share his faith with his staff, but also doesn’t want to be pushy. He is also aware that witnessing at work could bring complaints and even discrimination lawsuits. We were both surprised at how story helped the training process. We wondered if storying could be even more helpful. Customer service really comes down to treating others as the way you would like to be treated,” explained Gary.

“That very Biblical,” said Josie.

“Exactly. There are lots of stories in the Bible, so I began to do a little research. I was surprised to find out that storytelling is used to teach the Bible all over the world. There is even a way to tell the whole Bible in about eight or nine

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<sup>1</sup> Something like this happened at clothing retailer, Lands’ End. Kendall F. Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), Kindle 1752.

stories. The great thing about just telling the Bible stories is that they don't have anything to do with denominations, they're just stories. The stories are applicable to believers and receptive unbelievers alike.<sup>2</sup>" said Gary.

"But how do you tell a story to your staff? Stand in the middle of the store and spout it off?" questioned Josie.

"No, we actually set aside one hour per week for what we call optional leadership training. Those who are willing can come in an hour early on Wednesdays and we meet in the employee lounge. They get paid and donuts are available. If you don't want to listen, you can just come in at regular time. I'm fortunate to work for a boss who is willing to spend a little money to spread the gospel to his own workers. It's been amazing. Some workers are just there for an easy hour of pay but seem to come around to discuss the story after a while. This method doesn't make Christians instantly or anything. This is a slow and steady method that seems to change from the inside out instead of the outside in," explained Gary.

"How do you get people to discuss a story?" asked Josie. "I've always had a text read and then a lecture. But I do remember being told somewhere that most people only remember about ten percent of a lecture."

"Yes, you are right. Questions help lead the discussion and draw people in by asking what they think. These aren't questions that are answered in one word or even have a specific correct answer," explained Gary.

"So what kind of questions do you ask?" inquired Josie.

"Some specific story questions, but then some other standard questions would be: If you are a character in the story who would you be and why? What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humankind? How can this story make a difference in your life?" replied Gary.

"I don't think I've ever been in a Bible study where those questions were asked." Said Josie.

"That was me, too, until I started this," said Gary.

"Where do you get your material to do this?" asked Josie.

"I can give you some websites and a couple books if you are interested. I am still experimenting myself, but I will share what I know," replied Gary.

"It sounds crazy, but it might just be crazy enough to work," said Josie.

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<sup>2</sup> [storyingthescriptures.com/a-bible-overview-in-eight-or-nine-stories/](http://storyingthescriptures.com/a-bible-overview-in-eight-or-nine-stories/), accessed July 11, 2018.

Just then Gary's phone sounded. "Oh, I have to leave," said Gary looking at the time. "I have a meeting in five minutes. I didn't realize we'd been talking that long. Most of my books are at work if you want to take them home for a few days. My office is just around the corner if you want to come pick them up."

"Yeah, sure, I might as well give it a go," said Josie.

## II – One Month later after Church

Josie walked out to the fellowship hall after service to grab a cup of coffee before Sunday school started. As she was waiting in line, she noticed Gary was just ahead of her. "Hi, Gary, thanks for the storying information. I've been trying it at youth group and am going to try it in Sunday school today."

Gary replied, "Glad it was helpful. Things must be going better?"

"It can be a struggle, but at least with this storying methodology, I have another tool to use to disciple the kids. Storying is helpful, but in some ways, more work because it takes time to learn the story. I really was hoping for that easy, magic bullet."

"No, I don't think there are any magic bullets this side of heaven," chuckled Gary. "Tell me what's happened so far."

Josie thought for a minute, "It's more work because I have to learn the story. I've never had to do anything like this before. The kids like being able to give their input to what they think about the story. It took a couple sessions for them to realize that they could speak their minds and even ask questions. When they realized that I was interested in what they had to say, it was hard to get them to be quiet. How about you? Is your staff still showing up early on Wednesdays?"

"Yes, most of them are hanging in there. An interesting thing has happened the past couple weeks. I noticed the swearing had decreased significantly. The staff knows they can't swear when dealing with the customers, but back in the employee lounge was a different story," related Gary.

"So, what story did you tell so that they stopped swearing?" asked Josie.

"That's the interesting part, there was no specific story about swearing. In fact, I never mentioned that swearing was a sin, or that God didn't like it. Nothing like that was ever said," mused Gary.

"Then, how do you account for the change?" asked Josie.

“I don’t know for sure. I think it may be because we ask who God is in the story every week and they have learned a new respect for God. I don’t have any other explanation. How has your group reacted to storying?” said Gary.

“I think it has allowed some of the kids to be honest. I asked them if they liked the story last week. One gal piped up and said no, she didn’t like the story because Bible stories are just a lot of hoke. She was only there because her grandma made her come. That comment allowed several kids to drop the masks they had been wearing and have some authentic discussion on their true relationship with God,” related Josie.

“Those kids have all had instruction on what it means to be a church member. Weren’t you shocked?” asked Gary.

“Church membership and one’s relationship with God are two different things. So, no, I wasn’t shocked. This gal’s grandma had cornered me the first Sunday I was here. She wanted to make sure that I knew I was expected to make her granddaughter a believer. Just a little extra pressure as I got started,” chuckled Josie.

“Wow, I didn’t realize that was happening,” replied Gary.

“No, and don’t worry. I know I can’t make anyone believe. I can just give witness to who God is and tell His story. But the cool think about storying is that this young gal is looking at God and faith in a completely different way. The storying sessions don’t tell her how to believe but allow her to think about what God has just said,” said Josie.

By this time both had their cups of coffee and had begun to walk down the hall to the Sunday school rooms. As Josie turned to go to her classroom, they noticed the hallway was full. “Another thing about storying is that the kids like it and invite other kids to come,” said Josie. “I have a meeting with Pastor Larson this week. He said that he wanted to talk about this storying methodology.”

“I’m sure Pastor will be pleased if you are getting more kids to come,” replied Gary.

“I hope that is the reason for the meeting,” said Josie doubtfully.

### III – Pastor Larson’s office two days later

Josie was on edge as she waited for her meeting with Pastor Larson. He was a jovial man, but also demanded respect and got it. He had been trained in a very traditional manner and was most comfortable teaching in the same way. Josie knew that having a woman on staff was something new for Pastor Larson and suspected that she would have to work hard to gain his respect.

After her initial success with storying, Josie had begun to do more research. She knew this was something totally new to Pastor Larson and she wanted to be prepared. She was surprised at how much material was on the internet about Biblical storying. Until her initial conversation with Gary, she had never heard of it. It wasn’t like the program material that she was more familiar with. Each curriculum company seemed to claim that if you just bought their material, you would have disciples in six weeks or however long their program lasted. Storying was different; she had even changed as she prepared the story to tell the youth. It was a different way to memorize scripture.

Josie had been so deep in thought that she hadn’t even noticed that Pastor Larson was walking toward her until he was directly in front of her. “Good morning, Josie, glad you are here this morning,” boomed Pastor’s voice.

“Good morning, Pastor. I hope all is well with you this morning,” replied Josie.

“Come into my office and we can have a chat,” Pastor said as he motioned with his hand back to his office.

Josie followed Pastor down the hall and into his office. She was still on edge and it showed as she sat on the edge of her chair.

“Josie,” Pastor began, “You know that we brought you on staff to reach out to our youth in a more effective way that we have in the past. But I’ve heard some disturbing reports. A well respected, longtime member has come to complain. She said that you had called the Bible a pile of fables. Do you have anything to say about this?”

“Pastor, I never said that at all. I’m not even sure how she could have heard such a thing,” replied Josie.

“She has been struggling with a granddaughter who seemed delighted to say that you said the Bible wasn’t true,” countered Pastor Larson.

“Oh, okay. I think I see what has happened,” replied Josie. “Let me explain where I think that may be coming from.”

“Please do,” said Pastor Larson.

“I have been trying a new methodology of teaching the Bible. It involves first telling a Bible text like a story, like something that happened to me last night. But then, we do read the text. After that I just ask questions to help the kids discuss what happened in the story.”

“That sounds harmless enough, so how did this girl get the idea that the Bible is full of fables?” asked Pastor Larson.

“I think there could be a couple reasons. First, I get the impression that is what she wants to think. Second, I think that it may be from the word story. The English language doesn’t have many words for story. That means that story can describe a wide range of things. It can be a fib, a child’s fairy tale, or someone’s testimony. It can also describe a narrative text in the Bible. Would you agree?” asked Josie.

“I’ll give you that, but I think there is something deeper here than quibbling over a definition of a word,” said Pastor Larson.

“I know there is something deeper than definitions is here. There is a question that I have begun to ask after we read the text. I ask the kids “what do they like about the story?” Josie replied.

Pastor Larson interrupted, “Why on earth would you ask such a question? We are talking about God’s sacred Word here. We don’t get an opinion on it.”

“I agree that it is God’s sacred Word and should be held in high esteem. I ask the question because it helps me discern where the kids are spiritually. It allows them a safe space to ask questions,” said Josie.

“What do you mean discern where they are spiritually?” Pastor retorted. “These young people have been baptized, instructed in the faith, and many have joined the church. They are believers!”

“You reacted strongly to what I said. How safe would it be for this girl to voice her doubts to you or her grandmother? I think it is probably much safer for her to smile and nod when there is Bible teaching but then go her own way when she is able. Would you agree with that?” Josie asked nervously.

There was a pause. Josie could tell that Pastor did not like this question, but he did answer, “I guess you do have a point there. But don’t you think stories are for preschoolers and not teenagers?”

“I think stories are for all ages because I think God created our minds for story,” said Josie. She thought about sharing the beer commercial story example that Gary had given her, but quickly discarded that as inappropriate in this setting. “Jesus told stories and asked questions, would you agree?”

Pastor responded, “Yes, Jesus did do that.”

“Then I think if it was good enough for Jesus, that it should be good enough for us. As I’ve learned more about storying the Bible, I’ve found out that the Bible itself is 75% narrative, 15% poetry, and only 10% instructional material. I think this shows that God teaches us through story. Don’t you think?” asked Josie.

“Don’t be impertinent, young lady. I was taught by the top scholars who extracted the learning points from these so-called stories and formulated these points into our doctrine. That is what I was charged to teach when I was ordained, and that is what I will continue to teach as pastor of this church. How would you ever teach the Epistles with the storying method?” queried Pastor Larson.

Josie quivered a bit but as politely as she could, defended herself. “Pastor, I don’t mean to be disrespectful. From what I’ve experienced and learned in this past month, the story provides a structure to remember the points by. If I gave you Christmas ornaments but no tree to hang them on, they might get lost or broken. If, on the other hand, I give you a Christmas tree, as you get the ornaments you can hang them on the tree. Even if you can’t remember where you put the ornaments, you can go back to the tree and find them. The same thing happens with story. Individual points are hard to remember unless I have the story which contains them.

As far as teaching the Epistles, they are based on the stories of the Old Testament and the Gospels. I’m not sure yet, but I think I would try to tell those stories first before trying to teach the Epistles. I would just like to continue to use the storying method for a few months and see where it leads. The kids are much more engaged with this type of teaching and we’ve all learned more. I know this is a very different type of teaching than what you are used to, I’m just asking for a trial period.”

“I had called you in this morning to tell you to stop with this storying method and just get back to the tried and true methodology. I must give you credit, you have made some good points and have come well prepared. I will give you a trial

period of four months. You must hand in your story material ahead of time, so I know what it is that you are teaching. Can we agree on that?” asked Pastor Larson.

“Yes, sir, I can do that,” replied Josie. “Thank you for listening to me.” Josie attempted to walk out of the Pastor’s office as calmly as she could.

#### IV – Three months later

Josie had just filled her car with gas and decided to go try the expresso at Gas N More. As the expresso machine was filling her cup, Gary spotted Josie. “Hey, Josie,” Gary called. “How are things going at youth group?”

Josie turned around, surprised to see Gary. “Actually, good. Pastor hasn’t been too excited about the storying method, but I think I’ve seen good spiritual growth in the kids. How are things here?”

“Still telling the story, and it’s still making a difference. Now our big employee contest is to catch another employee doing something kind. Before, those acts of kindness were few and far between, now they come much more often. Why is it we always seem to talk over coffee?” Gary asked.

“I think it’s something about being Lutheran. When I was growing up, the cabinet at church with the communion wine was unlocked while the cupboard with the coffee had a huge padlock on it. I always thought that was interesting,” smiled Josie.

Gary chuckled, “I guess each church has its priorities.”

“Yes, I’m praying that St. Timothy’s will make storytelling a priority,” said Josie. “Storytelling is making so much difference. The kids are more engaged. I never realized that they didn’t know the context for most of the stories of the Bible. Now, they are beginning to see the bigger picture of how God works because they can see how the stories are connected.

I even have one senior boy who is severely dyslexic who does a great job telling the story. If you think about it, he has always had to be an oral learner because of his disability. He would struggle if we had him ask the questions, but he knows his story. He listens to the text on his phone from Bible Gateway and learns the story that way. He has just blossomed as a leader as we use this format.”

“How is the one girl with all the doubts doing?” asked Gary.

“She still has questions, but she is at youth group almost every week so I’m hoping that’s a good sign, replied Josie.

“How much longer are you on probation with Pastor Larson?” Gary asked.

Josie paused to think. “One more month, and then we will talk some more. I have lots of testimonies from the kids for him and I’ve been studying even more about storying and how other Christian groups use it. I really like using it, but it is very different from the traditional teaching methods. I hope to be able to continue storying but, at this point, I don’t know how it will turn out.”

## V Conclusion

There is no written end to this story. There are many possibilities. The young girl may or may not come to a faith relationship with God. The traditional pastor may or may not be able to see the advantages of storying over traditional teaching. Josie may get discouraged and seek a job at another church who is open to a “new” method that is actually very old. Reaching people with the Gospel is never easy and rarely clear cut. Biblical storytelling is one tool to evangelize and disciple people.

It is my hope that the following pages will be helpful if you are interested in learning more about chronological Biblical storytelling. As we have been on this adventure, we have done much research on storytelling. While our experiences are our own, much of the information about storytelling has been gleaned from others. I have attempted to give full credit to those sources that have been helpful to me. Each of these books have far more detail than I can include in this work. My hope is that the references will not be an intrusion as you read, but a source of help as you begin your own adventure in storytelling.

One of my favorite TV shows as a child was *Dragnet*. I liked it when Sargent Friday would just want the facts. I am geeky enough to like facts. The next section gives facts and details to how and why we use Biblical Storytelling, so I’ve entitled it, “Just the Facts, Ma,am.”

# Part 2 - Just the Facts Ma'am

## Chapter 1 The Science Behind the Story

Does using the word “story” and the word “science” in the same sentence seem like an oxymoron? In our culture we seem to equate science with truth and story with falsehood. A story is a type of structure in which the characters must deal with conflict or overcome problems to reach some type of conclusion. The information contained in this story structure can be true or false.

As we began to learn how to use story in our setting, we researched what we could find about how others used story. We were surprised to learn that a large segment of those who routinely use story are marketers, especially those who develop commercials. As medical science has developed new ways to image the brain as it works, they have discovered how engaging story is to the mind. Marketers have grabbed onto this information to sell their product and make money. For example, there is a major beer company that uses large horses and puppies to sell their beer. These animals have nothing to do with beer. However, the story these animals depict draws a positive reaction from the audience which in turn sells more beer.

I believe God created us for story but the church, with good intentions, has been tried to improve on story. For the most part, the church has relegated storying to small children. The secular advertising community has rediscovered the power of story and is using it to their advantage. They have exploited the advances in brain scan technology to the full.

My undergraduate degree is in Medical Technology and I worked in hospital labs for over thirty years. I was trained in biology and chemistry and am still interested in them. As I learned about the science of story I was awed at how God has created us, and how the Bible communicates in the way that He designed us. Five things stuck out to me in my research:

- God created us to communicate in story.
- Story engages the brain and helps us to remember and learn.
- Story is experiential.

- Story is transformational.
- Story forms community.

I will discuss each of these at length.

God created us to communicate in story.

First, let's look at what the Bible says about story and then look at what science has discovered so that we can see how the two intertwine.

Moses commands the people, in Deuteronomy 6:6-9, to teach God's commands. This is so important that he repeats these instructions again in Deut. 11:18-20:

So, commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these words of mine. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (NLT)

We, in our twenty-first mindset, picture teaching being carried out in the way that we were taught. We may image a classroom of students behind desks writing down everything the instructor says. We forget that until the last two hundred years, only the elite were literate. The masses would have learned through oral methods.

The major tool for learning orally is the story. Thus, a story can be told at home, when you are walking on the road or at bedtime. Moses does tell them to write the words, so they could have God's word on their bodies and homes. This would have been done literally by scribes and the people did carry the written word on themselves and had it in their homes. In a broader sense, this could have been done by telling the story, so it was in their minds (foreheads) or would be carried out in their actions in life (or through their hands). The story would permeate the home as it was told.

The Psalmist Asaph gives insight to how information was taught in Psalm 78:1-4:

<sup>1</sup> O my people, listen to my instructions.  
Open your ears to what I am saying,  
<sup>2</sup> for I will speak to you in a parable.  
I will teach you hidden lessons from our past—  
<sup>3</sup> stories we have heard and known,  
stories our ancestors handed down to us.  
<sup>4</sup> We will not hide these truths from our children;  
we will tell the next generation  
about the glorious deeds of the Lord,  
about his power and his mighty wonders. (NLT)

Stories are used to transmit information and history. These lessons from the past are then re-told so future generations can learn. These stories help the people know who God really is; that He is powerful and acts in mighty ways. Psalm 78 continues for another sixty-eight verses to recount the history of the nation of Israel. This Psalm puts the history and story of the nation into a song so that it can be remembered, learned, and passed on easily.

Psalm 78 is not the only historical psalm. Psalms 105-107, 114, 135, and 136 also recount Israel's history. Again, these are more examples of singing the story of the nation. During the singing of this history, the people would also begin to know and praise the God that created and sustained them. These psalms remain for us today to be used for the same reasons.

As we move forward in the Bible, we learn that Jesus used stories to teach. Mark tells us that Jesus used parables, which are stories, to teach. Matthew 13:2-3, "Then he sat there and taught as the people stood on the shore. He told many stories in the form of parables." John concludes his Gospel with these words in John 20:31, "But these (stories) are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name." Paul says, in two different places, that the stories of Israel were written down, so we could learn from them. 1 Cor. 10:11: "These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age." Rom. 15:4, "Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled."

Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and His resurrection ushered in the New Covenant. Now salvation was obtained by grace through faith in Jesus. This was a radical idea for the Jews to accept. They had formed an exclusive nation that followed the Mosaic law to earn salvation. The early apostles used the history of the nation to show how Jesus fulfilled the promises contained in the story of the Old Covenant.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter recounts the story of Israel to explain what is happening (Acts 2:14-41). He also explains and defends the healing of the lame man on the temple steps by using the story (Acts 3:11-26.4:8-12). Stephen preaches the longest sermon recorded in Acts. It is the story of the nation of Israel, what they had done in the past and what they continued to do. It was not received well, and Stephen became the first martyr (Acts 7).

Peter and Paul share their stories to explain the new thing that Jesus has done. Peter justifies going into the home of the gentile Cornelius by recounting the story of his vision combined with the story of Cornelius' vision (Acts 10). Then Peter tells how the Holy Spirit also fell on these gentiles. This helps explain that this action was not heretical, but in line with what God desired. Paul tells his conversion story three different times in Acts (Ch. 9, 22, 26) to explain how he met Jesus. It is a tool to explain the Gospel of Jesus to both religious and political leaders.

As we consider the Bible, we see that God has given us a book that is seventy-five percent narrative or stories.<sup>3</sup> I believe He has done this because He knew how He designed us. With modern advances in medicine, secular medical science is showing that God has created us humans with brains wired for story.<sup>4</sup> This wiring is present from birth and these neural circuits are found at a deep subconscious level. As these circuit mature, they are re-enforced by childhood learning experiences which a child will naturally interpret as a story. Most children, at age 6, can understand that there is a conflict or problem to be solved in a story, and can learn and begin to apply that learning to themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Novelli, *Shaped by the Story: Discover the Art of Bible Storying*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse Press, 2013), Kindle 34.

<sup>4</sup> Avery T. Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), Kindle 223.

<sup>5</sup> Haven, 468- 482.

With new brain imaging technology, we can now watch the brain work like a symphony when a story is heard. It takes multiple parts of the brain working together to form the story. It must take the sound of the words that are heard and combine them with images that these sounds suggest. These images are combined with the person's conscious and unconscious memories and the story is brought to the conscious mind. Thus, story is the structure that we can use to bring together experiences and things we have learned and begin to make sense of them. As we begin to interpret our world, story allows us to plan our lives and gives us a roadmap to follow.<sup>6</sup>

The structure of story can act as a bridge from the abstract external world into the human internal world.<sup>7</sup> Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, explains it this way:

Story is the most natural way of enlarging and deepening our sense of reality, and then enlisting us as participants in it. Stories open doors to areas or aspects of life that we didn't know were there, or had quit noticing out of over-familiarity, or supposed were out-of-bounds to us. They then welcome us in.<sup>8</sup>

The story of the Bible is ultimately the story about Jesus who is Immanuel, God with us. The concept of God is abstract, but God has given us information about Jesus in the form of story. Story has been shown to be the multi-purpose communication tool. Because God has wired us for story, it can reach people of every level of literacy, education and sophistication. It is versatile and works with any culture, especially an image-rich social media culture. It is well accepted by young people of this post- modern age and opens doors for the Gospel in a resistant world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 422-482.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 13

<sup>9</sup> J O. Terry, *Basic Bible Storying: Preparing and Presenting Bible Stories for Evangelism, Discipleship, Training, and Ministry*, rev. ed. (Fort Worth, Tex.: Church Starting Network, ©2008), Kindle 419.

Story engages the brain and helps us to remember and learn.

I have claimed that God has designed our brains for story so let's look at how that design helps us remember and learn. Story circuits are found in the subconscious brain. Here these circuits collect and categorize information as we sense it. This information is processed even before it can reach the conscious mind. The story circuits act like an interstate express lane. Just as the express lane speeds up traffic, these story circuits speed up the processing of incoming information. According to studies, information in story form reaches the conscious mind more quickly than any other form of information.<sup>10</sup>

Story is a structure on which content can be hung. If information were Christmas ornaments, story is the Christmas tree. Image a lecture where the teacher tosses out a steady stream of facts and principals. In our analogy, this information would be a series of Christmas ornaments. A person can only catch and hold a limited number of ornaments. When that limit is reached, some ornaments get dropped and perhaps broken. Others may not even get caught and roll away. Even if the instructor throws out massive amounts of information, only a small portion can be caught.

Now image that instead of a lecture, these same principals are told as a story. The story acts as a Christmas tree. When the person catches the information or the ornament, it can be hung on the tree. This would free the person's hand to continue to catch ornaments (information) and hang it on the tree. After the lecture, this person may not be able to recall every piece of information until she reviews the story. You might forget what ornaments are on your tree, but you can always find them again just by going to the tree and walking around it. The same thing happens with facts contained in a story. Facts are remembered more accurately in a story structure because the structure allows information to be understood and pulled out more efficiently.

Story involves more parts of our brains than naked facts which helps the story stick in our memory. Lists of facts only engage the left side language parts of a brain. However, a story engages both the right and left hemispheres of our brain. This is because story arouses emotion and empathy whose centers are in the right

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<sup>10</sup> Haven, 503

brain. In fact, when a memory is recalled, our brains also retrieve the emotion involved with the memory.<sup>11</sup> These additional “hooks” in the brain help make the story memorable.

A story will also hook into our prior knowledge to help understand the situation in the story and to help us remember the information.<sup>12</sup> If a current situation is like something from our history, the lessons learned there will transfer to the present. A previous story is contained in neural connections. When this “story map” is successful, we will continue to use it. The circuits that are part of this map will “fire” each time the map is used. Neural connection that fire together tend to stay together.<sup>13</sup>

Both Haven and Willis agree that it is very difficult to remember random facts that are not framed within a story. For it is the details of a story, such as location, people or dialogue, that help us remember the information. Stories are more effective and powerful than any other narrative structure, and they are the most efficient way to motivate, teach, communicate facts, and form world views.<sup>14 15</sup>

## Story is experiential.

New imaging techniques have shown that the same areas of our brains that are engaged and activated for the recall of real experiences are also engaged in the experience of a story. This means our brains seem to treat story experiences the same as those we experience in real life.<sup>16</sup> We can learn from stories just like we can learn from real life.

Stories can act like a flight simulator for life. Pilots train in a flight simulator so they know what to do in an emergency. If a pilot makes a wrong decision and crashes the plane in a flight simulator, the computer can simply be reset without damage to a plane or loss of life. The pilot learns from his mistakes and is better prepared for real life. Story, like a flight simulator, is a safe place to experience

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<sup>11</sup> Wills, 744-746.

<sup>12</sup> Haven, 962

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 574.

<sup>14</sup> Haven, 1160

<sup>15</sup> Willis, 250, 744-746

<sup>16</sup> Haven, 1146.

things that we would not want to experience in real life. Lessons can be learned safely. Just as we can crash and burn in a flight simulator, but live to apply the learning, we can do the same with a story.

As we listen to a story, our brains automatically begin to empathize with the characters and their struggles. The conflict of a story may remind us of our own struggles in life and we subconsciously connect our experiences with the story. This results in transferring the lessons learned in the story into our own lives. This connection with the story is what makes the story relevant. The lessons learned in a story act like a life experience in the brain and helps provide a context for us to understand and remember what we learned.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout history, all cultures have passed on their values, beliefs, and traditions through story because story defines who we are.<sup>18</sup> Members of a culture share these same stories and these stories act to unify an ethnic group. Story can provide a framework for our lives, it can order our memories and give value to our experiences.

Story is transformational.

Story can give space for God to tune our lives to His. We filter God's story through our own story. As we experience God's story we can begin to imagine what the transformed life could look like. God can integrate our brains through His story and do the hard work of transformation.<sup>19</sup>

There are scientific reasons why stories are so effective in the process of transformation. One of the wonderfully mysterious outcomes of storytelling and listening is their capacity to enable our brain's left and right modes of processing to work together.<sup>20</sup> Information or principles without a story structure will only stimulate the left side of the brain. Story, on the other hand, involves both the right and left sides of the brain as it is processed.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 901-940.

<sup>18</sup> Novelli, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>20</sup> Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: SaltRiver, ©2010) 137.

Often in our modern attempts to efficiently teach God’s word, we have separated the principles from the story. This teaching style only involves the left side of the brain. Our sinful nature naturally disconnects our heart from God. Teaching the principles removed from their story allows us to dodge the truth and to resist integrating it into our lives. Rules and principles don’t always allow for the intricacy of life. In these situations, it is easy to distort the image of God. Stories can enhance or change the perception of our world much more easily than rules because they help us understand complexity.<sup>21</sup>

It takes effort and extra attention to follow God’s rules to change our lives. It takes both sides of the brain combined with the pre-frontal cortex to consciously choose an intentional response to emotions. When Godly principles are part of a story, instead of only stimulating one side of the brain, both sides are stimulated. This helps us make better intentional choices in our life so that these principles are better integrated into right living. Curt Thompson says, “The power of storytelling goes beyond the border of the story itself. It moves into the nooks and crannies of our memories and emotions, sometimes gently, sometimes explosively, revealing, awakening, shocking, calling.”<sup>22</sup>

We experienced the transformative power of storying with a group of men who worked for a concrete contractor. The owner of the business wanted to share his Christian faith with his workers. He would cook breakfast for his workers at 6 am on Monday morning while Tom led a Bible storying time with them. They made very few comments and only a couple of the men would answer any questions. They did listen, though. As the summer went on the boss noticed that these men stopped swearing. The topic of swearing as a sin had never been mentioned or spoken of in any way. However, every week the question, “Who is God?” was asked. Tom and the boss were pleasantly surprised at this unexpected outcome.

N.T. Wright, the British theologian, has a great quote about the transformation power of Bible story. Story can transform because there is a type of authority that comes with a story. It is rather long, but he says it much better than I can.

Story authority, as Jesus knew only too well, is the authority that really works. Throw a rule book at people’s head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go

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<sup>21</sup> Haven, 1690.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson,, 102.

away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a 'God-view'. That, actually, is what the parables are all about. They offer, as all genuine Christian story-telling does, a world-view which, as someone comes into it and finds how compelling it is, quietly shatters the world-view that they were in already. Stories determine how people see themselves and how they see the world. Stories determine how they experience God, and the world, and themselves, and others. Great revolutionary movements have told stories about the past and present and future. They have invited people to see themselves in that light, and people's lives have been changed. If that happens at a merely human level, how much more when it is God himself, the creator, breathing through his word.<sup>23</sup>

### Story forms community.

Story has the power to create a special chemistry which draws us into community as the audience and the storyteller become one for the duration of the story.<sup>24</sup> Storytelling not only effectively communicates facts, concepts, beliefs, and values of the characters in the story but encourages us to adopt them. As this happens, we begin to form bonds with each other and the storyteller. This creates a common identity and purpose. The result is that stories build a feeling of involvement and a sense of community.<sup>25</sup>

The secular world has begun to use this concept. The clothing company, Lands' End, was having difficulty forming a unified work team until they began to use stories in their training sessions. The stories were actual stories of employees that would help the new trainees model good customer service. These stories not only improved customer service but went on to create a feeling of community and pride within the company that proved even more valuable.<sup>26</sup> If this use of man

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<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, *How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?*  
<http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative/>  
Accessed July 12, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Terry, 1745-1758.

<sup>25</sup> Haven, 1784-1787.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 1752.

centered stories can create a sense of community, how much more could the stories from the Living Word, affect those around us?

We have observed that Bible storying small groups create a space where the participants become like family. This sense of community is so important in this mobile society where many of us do not live near biological family. Social media is the major source of many “friendships,” but these are shallow. The participants of a Bible storying small group experience the story together and discuss the implications of the story for their lives. It is a safe place to share the difficulties of life and intercede for one another in prayer. It is this kind of Spirit filled atmosphere that creates a closely bonded community.

## Chapter 2 Traditional Teaching vs. Storytelling Teaching

### Doctrine versus storytelling

Jesus knew that we humans had been designed to love story and He used it to communicate the most profound truths to His followers. We have the Bible that is full of God’s story and we can use these stories to convey truth today.<sup>27</sup> We have seen how science now shows that our brains are created for story. Story helps us remember and learn. It is experiential, transformational and helps build community.

Story conveys emotion which is a key element that helps create meaning and facilitate memory storage. In addition, story has context which our brains use to create relevance. Story with emotion and context provides more “index points” in our brains that help memory and recall.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the context and details of the characters and storyline help us remember the truth contained in a story. Abstract concepts and data are hard to remember but story dovetails with the processes needed to recall truth. Facts are remembered more accurately when they are contained in a story structure; disconnected facts tend to be forgotten.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, our modern way of teaching in the church has been developed much after the factory model. Students are put on an “assembly line” of classes where the instructor has, for the sake of time, removed all details of the story and just gives the main points.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen above, details of the story are what makes the content memorable. In this system, the religious expert does the teaching from the front of the room and often programs take the place of relationships.<sup>31</sup> This is just the opposite of how we see Jesus teaching His disciples.

Many leaders in the church have set aside storytelling, the most powerful communication tool, because they think story cannot convey serious facts and concepts. They substitute information-based text instead. Learning from this type of material requires critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills. These skills

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<sup>27</sup> Willis, 306-314.

<sup>28</sup> Haven, 1215.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 1160.

<sup>30</sup> Novelli, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

require work to learn. When these skills are learned, they still require intentional effort to use to analyze the information contained in the text. By contrast, our brains prefer story because it allows us to master information easily.<sup>32</sup> Thus, because storying methods are set aside, these leaders wonder why their communication is so inefficient.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, the media is well aware of the power of story and uses it to influence us as consumers to act. Unfortunately, advertisements are where most children form their worldview which amounts to one of consumerism.<sup>34</sup> The American dream is essentially consumerism; if you work hard enough you can be happy because you have things, luxury, and entertainment. Churches have also been influenced by consumerism and market their messages. Church hoppers act as consumers looking to fill products and services.

The story of Jesus is an alternative to the American dream. It is powerful enough to change the culture of consumerism because it can change our story.<sup>35</sup> Doing storytelling is like detoxing the old, fact-based way of studying the Bible. It builds a different culture. Storytelling returns to the manner of Jesus' teaching and will challenge everything you have practiced but it will also strengthen every doctrinal truth.<sup>36</sup> We have found that we have had to unlearn the traditional way of teaching to learn how to use storying.

Biblical storytelling doesn't tell others what to believe but allows them to explore what to believe. It gives space for God to speak which is more powerful than any human teacher and connects God's story to an individual's story.<sup>37</sup> Our own stories often cloud our response to God. Most of us come from cultures where we must be doctrinally correct, but we fail to understand how God can speak through emotions.<sup>38</sup>

Biblical storytelling does not argue doctrine but conveys God's truth and may soften hardened hearts to reach those who have resisted traditional Bible

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<sup>32</sup> Haven, 493.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>34</sup> Novelli, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>36</sup> Willis, 41-49.

<sup>37</sup> Novelli, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, 106.

teaching.<sup>39</sup> Stories will often slip under the defenses of non-believers because they do not directly confront their beliefs.<sup>40</sup> We have found this to be very true in our marketplace small groups. These are groups that meet in the workplace where many of the participants were not Christian. Biblical storying allows them to be disciplined to faith.

Bible stories invite us to participate in their reality, not to understand that reality. It brings God's presence into our lives.<sup>41</sup> This presence allows the story of Scripture to be regenerative as it opens us to a different future.<sup>42</sup> Storytelling, especially in small groups, allows space for questions. Questions are a much better way to get people to think over a story than lecturing. Questions act like a hook, but lectures act like a club. It is better to hook the listeners of a story than to beat them.<sup>43</sup> As the listeners consider how to answer these question, the Holy Spirit has room to work. Storytelling is not an instant way to results but is a long-term discipling tool.

This quote from Walter Brueggemann sums up the need for the change from instruction to storytelling:

We are not changed by new rules. The deep places in our lives, places of resistance and embrace, are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently, apart from fear or hurt.<sup>44</sup>

## Literate Methodology versus Oral Methodology

Chronological Biblical storytelling was originally developed for the mission field where often the culture consisted of oral learners. Many times, these people groups did not have a written language. It would take Bible translators years to develop a written language to translate the Bible into their local language.

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<sup>39</sup> Terry, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Willis, 918.

<sup>41</sup> Novelli, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Thomson, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Willis, 413.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 109-110.

Missionaries discovered it was easier to give these people an oral Bible.<sup>45</sup> Seventy per cent of unreached people are oral learners and Bible storytelling gives us a method to evangelize and disciple those who cannot read.<sup>46</sup>

As missionaries trained in Bible storying returned to the states, they realized that this methodology would also work here. US Department of Education reports that fewer than half of all Americans can handle and understand the prose of the Bible. More and more people are choosing to get their information in non-print forms in this media rich society.<sup>47</sup> Real Life Church in northern Idaho was the test church to see if oral Bible stories would speak to the so called literate American culture. They found that it worked very well.<sup>48</sup> One reason Biblical storytelling works so well is that more and more people prefer to learn in a non-literate manner.

#### Reading levels of U.S. Adults<sup>49</sup>

Below Basic – 14%

These people are illiterate or functionally non-literates which means they can read with difficulty, but their literacy is so limited that they rely on orality to function in life. Obviously, oral Bible stories are a much better way to reach these people than written material.

Basic - 29%

Semi- literates can function as literates in society but are unable to extract ideas from lengthy text which, of course, includes the Bible. These benefit from Biblical storytelling and will be better able to read something after they know what it says.

Intermediate - 44%

Literates will be able to read a Bible and get understanding from it but still will enjoy an oral story.

Proficient -13%

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<sup>45</sup> Willis, 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 104-108.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Statistic Brain, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/number-of-american-adults-who-cant-read/>, accessed June 20, 2017.

Highly literate people will be able to read a Bible and get understanding from it but will still enjoy an oral story. They may have trouble communicating with someone at a lower literacy level and will benefit by communicating through story.<sup>50</sup>

The above table shows that only half of adults in US can read basic material well. Other interesting statistics:<sup>51</sup>

- Only 1 of 3 college graduates is a proficient reader.
- 20 million people have completely stopped reading and choose to get their information from other media which are the greatest influencers of worldview today.
- Fewer than half of US adults can read the literature of the Bible so literate discipling methods do not work with this group.
- There is so much information available that most people only skim and do not read seriously.

The latest literacy statistics from the Department of Education are no better than the statistics from 2003.<sup>52</sup>

These statistics show that we need a method to disciple those who cannot, will not, or do not like to read. Biblical storytelling will do this. This is a challenge to typical techniques because we assume that literate techniques are far superior to oral methods. There was a study in Kenya that “discovered that the tribal people who learned just from oral stories, showed as much, or more, depth of theology as those who learned from a seminary’s systematic literary methods.”<sup>53</sup> Storytelling is deeply experiential and theological at the same time. It allows the stories to connect as one great metanarrative with the themes of covenant, redemption, restoration and kingdom woven throughout.

Oral stories have been used for most of human history to pass along history, values, and culture. Our brains prefer a story format and process information better in story structure. Fact filled texts are difficult and feel like bitter medicine while stories are much easier and feel like candy in comparison.<sup>54</sup> Research shows that

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<sup>50</sup> Terry, 453-486.

<sup>51</sup> Willis, 161-175.

<sup>52</sup> National Center for Educational Statistics, [https://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf\\_demographics.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp), accessed June 20, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Novelli, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Haven, 186.

information in stories is remembered better than any other form. In fact, just listening to stories helps to develop logical and analytical thinking as well as language literacy.<sup>55</sup>

When we hear a Bible story, we can visualize the story in our minds which helps our memory and recall of the story. The imagination is far richer than what filmmakers can put on video. As we listen to the story, our minds effortlessly go through our memories and think of a time when something similar happened to us. Oral learners enter the story and can see it from the inside. Literate learners stand outside the story and evaluate and criticize it.<sup>56</sup> God has created us to love story so much that Biblical storytelling is not just for children; it will work at any level of spiritual maturity.

## Fragmented Teaching versus Integrated Teaching

Much of the teaching at our churches is fragmented. Those churches that teach from a lectionary series of scripture will only preach on a fraction of the Bible. It is as if we would only read ten random pages of a novel. We might find some interesting facts about the characters, but there would be no way that we would be able to know the overarching theme. Most church attenders do not have a clue to how the stories of the Bible fit together. This lack of understanding of the Bible stories leads many to develop their own theology.<sup>57</sup>

It has been our experience that as leaders, we over estimate how much our congregation really knows of the Bible. Most likely, they know much less than you think they know. When we wrongly assume that our congregation knows more than they do, we remove the details of the story and just give the main points as we teach. That removes the structure of the story and does not help the people remember the truth. It also allows the Bible to be reduced to principles and results in a low regard for God's Word.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 101-108.

<sup>56</sup> Willis, 498-409.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 143-148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 351.

When there is low regard for the Bible, it is seen as something to analyze. This attitude effectively creates distance between us and the Bible so that it is easy to dissect. However, remember only the dead can be dissected and the Bible is living.<sup>59</sup> By seeing the whole story, we can see what it is to live in God's kingdom. The metanarrative of the Bible tells how God designed the kingdom, but humans wanted their own kingdoms. This required God to begin to restore His kingdom and the storyline's apex is Jesus.<sup>60</sup> If this story is allowed to become fragmented, it will cease to shape our lives.

Unfortunately, most Christians do not see the value of context.<sup>61</sup> Because our most popular teaching methods fail to teach the overall story of the Bible, people tend to treat the Bible as a book of principles and probe it for useful nuggets. It is easy to find a verse and assign our own meaning to it. A prime example of this is Jeremiah 29:11, "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." I have heard many individuals claim this verse as a personal verse for themselves. I think it is true that God does love each individual and wants the best for them. However, this is not the context of this verse. This verse is part of a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the people who had been deported to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. If we put this into context of this letter, the recipients are told that their group will be in Babylon for seventy years. Many who heard the letter read will die before the seventy years are past and it will be their children and grandchildren who will be able to return to Jerusalem. They will not personally be restored to the land, but their people group will be.

The letter goes onto say what the Lord will do to those who do not believe. Jer. 29:17, "I will send war, famine, and disease upon them and make them like bad figs, too rotten to eat." I don't know of anyone that would want to claim this verse. However, in the scheme of randomly selecting verses of someone else's story to apply to myself personally, verse 17 is as applicable as verse 11.

There is a need to reclaim story as a communication tool for God's word. The Bible is seventy-five percent narrative, fifteen percent poetry and ten percent

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<sup>59</sup> Novelli, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 8.

instructional. Poetry stimulates our brains in a similar manner to story.<sup>62</sup> So we can see that ninety percent of the Bible can be integrated into our brains well when told like a story. In contrast, typical Church teaching is ninety percent purely instructional, exactly opposite of the Book that it teaches from.

The expert lecturing to the class is what we know and have invested effort into and so it is hard to let go and change methodology.<sup>63</sup> Biblical storytelling can be used for evangelizing, planting churches, discipling, training for leaders, and encouraging believers. We have found it extremely effective when used to grow in knowledge of God Word. Our church members have become much more Biblically literate as they have heard the Bible through story.

## Worldview

In the past, the church has equated church attendance, Bible reading, giving and serving in the church as an indication of a changed worldview. Unfortunately, these are only surface actions that do not change the core worldview. The church teaches doctrines but that still does not touch worldview. The church's discipleship has been poor: twenty-nine percent of Americans say that they are committed to Christ, but only three percent have a Christian worldview, ninety-eight percent of born again teenagers don't have a Biblical worldview.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately, most Americans have a negative view of Christianity. I believe this shows that the world is doing a better job of discipling the public than the church is. Many forms of media are accessible around the clock and can be delivered into our homes. It brings in a culture that tends to desensitize us to God.<sup>65</sup>

The media is full of images and metaphors which influence our worldview. Metaphors activate many banks of knowledge in our brains and help us understand vague concepts. Our thought processes are largely metaphorical, in fact, the average American uses six metaphors per minute of spoken language. Metaphors are used to define our viewpoint, expectations, and actions. Bible stories also show

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<sup>62</sup> Thompson103.

<sup>63</sup> Novelli, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Willis, 852.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 1278-1304.

metaphor and will challenge worldview. God spoke through Moses to help change the Israelites' worldview from an Egyptian one to a Godly one.

As we begin to understand the story character's intent and actions, we can overlay these into our own life. We find application to the story in comparing their lives to ours. We understand morally problematic situations best through the metaphor found in Bible stories.<sup>66</sup> As we learn from the characters, we can begin to see ourselves in God's story and that moves us to action. It brings God's presence into our lives and changes our worldview.<sup>67</sup> N.T. Wright said that the best way to change one's worldview is through better stories, the stories of the Bible.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Haven, 981-1046.

<sup>67</sup> Novelli, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Willis, 1314.

## Chapter 3 - Telling a Bible Story

How to pick a story or series of stories.

Obviously, we can tell people just one Bible story, but Biblical storytelling is most effective when the stories are connected around a topic. We have found that it is effective to combine several Old Testament stories with several New Testament stories in a series. This has helped our congregation to see the metanarrative of the Bible. Over time, as we “hopscotch” through the Bible repeatedly, each set has new stories that fill in the gaps from the previous set. It is also possible to alternate an Old Testament story series with a New Testament story series.

Stories should be chosen for a specific purpose for the audience, not because they are the favorite of the leader. To be effective, the leader must exegete, or interpret, his audience and pick Bible stories that address the audience’s worldview so that Bible truth can speak clearly to their group.<sup>69</sup> Missionaries obviously need to learn how the local people view the world. Foreign worldviews are usually very different from those in the west. Even different parts of the United States have different worldviews. Rural people typically have a different view than suburbia than those in an urban area. A leader must be willing to develop relationships and listen to those he ministers to.

With any group of people, there will be bridges in their worldview that will be beliefs that help the people understand the Bible, and there will be barriers. Barriers are obstacles that keep someone from accepting a Biblical worldview. As you consider your audience’s bridges and barriers to the gospel, you can pick your stories accordingly.<sup>70</sup> Select the stories based on the spiritual truth that the listeners need which use the bridges of their worldview.<sup>71</sup> Failure to pick appropriate stories may increase hostility and resistance of the listeners.<sup>72</sup>

To confront worldview with Bible stories you can challenge issue head on, bypass the issue until some stories have been told, or displace the issues with a

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<sup>69</sup> Terry 141-278.

<sup>70</sup> Willis, 1334-1354.

<sup>71</sup> Terry, 739-948.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 382.

greater truth.<sup>73</sup> Which method you choose will depend on you and your audience. Listen for guidance from the Holy Spirit as you choose stories for a set. Do not be afraid to adjust the story set as teaching proceeds and more of your audience's worldview is revealed. It may take as many as five to seven stories to address a deep worldview issue.<sup>74</sup> If you are new to Biblical storytelling, you may find it helpful to begin with prepared story sets. We have included a sample story set in this book.

### How to prepare and tell a story.

Michael Novelli's definition of a story is: a character wants something and overcomes conflict to get it.<sup>75</sup> Story is not the content, which may contain truth or falsehoods, but it is the scaffolding on which the content is hung. In Biblical storytelling, God's Word is shared as an intentional and uninterrupted story. This is usually followed by questions or learning exercises to help the listeners process the information in the story. It is most effective to tell the story continuously without interruption for comment. Comments should be saved for after the story.<sup>76</sup>

You may certainly tell a Bible text verbatim as a story. However, a Bible story must tell well and must be understandable to listeners. If text as is does not meet these criteria, it should be crafted.<sup>77</sup> In crafting a Bible story, the teller is in a tension between preserving the most accurate account of the text and making the story understandable.<sup>78</sup> You are not out to rewrite scripture but to make it accessible to an oral learner.<sup>79</sup>

Difficult Bible names can be distracting for the teller of the story and for the listeners, especially if they are not a key to the story line. These may be simplified as a description. For example, the phrase "the country north of Israel" may be used instead of the name "Aram." Simply the name "Rabshakeh" to "the Assyrian general." You may leave out socially unacceptable details so that the audience will not quit listening. When crafting a story, consider the age of the listeners. Young

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 1060-1076

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 1229.

<sup>75</sup> Novelli, 28.

<sup>76</sup> Terry, 255-262.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 1428.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 1919.

<sup>79</sup> Novelli, 50.

children will need a different vocabulary than adults. You may wish to harmonize different accounts of the same story, especially when telling a Gospel story. A long story may be shortened, or a short story embedded in another story.<sup>80</sup>

As you begin to prepare a Bible text to tell as a story, read the text slowly multiple times, in several translations. We find that the NLT, CEV, ERV, and Amplified Bible can be very helpful to see the text in modern language. We like to use the website of Bible Gateway as an easy source of multiple versions.<sup>81</sup> The ERV or Easy to Read version is helpful to prepare stories. However, you may find the ESV and NIV translations may add nuances. We often copy the text from the ERV into a document where we can simplify names and vocabulary.

If there is a verse you don't understand, do some research on it, search for historical context, especially if the listeners are unfamiliar with it. Try not to introduce more than five names of people or places; more than five new names tend to be confusing for an oral learner. Try not to cut dialog because this develops the characters. If gaps develop in this process, the story must be reconnected. Smooth over the story so that it flows.<sup>82</sup>

Even with all the above, respect the Bible and stay true to the story; do not embellish the text. Descriptions will slow a story down and verbs will speed it up and give it energy. Be consistent with the name used for God in the story to prevent confusion. Read your crafted story out loud; there is something about saying it out loud that is important.<sup>83</sup> Does it flow well? If not, try to edit the story but still maintain integrity with the original text.

Mentally break the story into scenes in your mind and enter into the story as you tell it. After reading the story out loud several times, attempt to tell the story without looking at the text. It may be helpful to record the story and listen to it repeatedly. Have another person listen to it and give you feed back. The more stories you memorize, the easier it becomes. We found it difficult as we began to learn the stories, but it is much easier now. The benefit to telling stories is that you begin to memorize large chunks of the Bible.

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<sup>80</sup> Terry, 1298-1377.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

<sup>82</sup> Novelli, 51.

<sup>83</sup> Terry, 1381-1776.

We have found that ten to twenty verses of Bible text is the best size of text to tell the story. If there are fewer than ten verses the story is too short, but if there are more than twenty verses, the story is harder to tell and harder for our audience to grasp the details. Some storytellers will simplify and combine chapters of the Bible. We don't find this to be as useful in our setting as this requires too many details to be dropped. There certainly are situations where this type of story could be beneficial.

We will, however, use a very simplified story of multiple chapters to provide context between stories. For example, we did a story series on the Divine Intruder, a series which focused on how God can break into our lives in different ways. This series is included at the end of this book. We did various characters, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is important to connect the stories in the series<sup>84</sup> and we did it by giving our audience the historical highlights between characters. As we moved between characters we provided connections as an extremely shortened, but relevant story for the context of the story before it was told.

In both our storytelling small group sessions and sermons, we begin with the context. To delineate our comments from the text, we begin the story with the phrase, "And now a story from the Word of God." We then tell the story without comment and end the story by saying, "And that was a story from the Word of God." This way our listeners know what is from the Bible and what is our comment on the text. Remember, oral learners only have the Bible as it is presented in the story and we want to give them a good Bible.

Bible stories should be structured so that they are useful for teaching and retention and are repeatable.<sup>85</sup> As you begin, you may want to use stories prepared by others, but eventually you will want to develop your own series of stories. To meet the needs of your audience, it will be best to prepare your own. There will come a time when prepared a prepared story series becomes like hand-me-down clothes, some will fit but others will not.

No two people will tell the story the same way. Some will use more dialog, some more descriptions, and others more verbs. It's ok to tell the story with the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 1806.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid 1441

personality that God has given you. You need to meet the needs of your audience and use the giftings that God has given you. We use one method of storytelling, Novelli uses another and Terry still a slightly different technique. Use the storytelling technique that works in your setting.

## Chapter 4 - Storytelling Small Groups

Our storytelling small groups have four parts; the pre-story part to prepare hearts and minds to receive, the Bible story, the post-story to give a time to understand and apply the truths for transformation, and an ending of prayer. The pre- and post-story times should be dialog instead of monologue.<sup>86</sup> One of the benefits of a storytelling session is the space for self-discovery. It is a place for the participants to explore their beliefs and compare these beliefs to what Bible says. Many times, people have preconceived ideas of what they think the Bible says but are surprised to find out that it really doesn't say that at all.<sup>87</sup>

Storytelling sessions can be flexible, so they are productive and interesting instead of strictly structured. You do not need to be slaves to the system, but at the same time do not be afraid to follow a similar format each time. Some rituals are good. Western learners have been conditioned to answer questions in the way the teacher wants them answered. Storying is a new type of learning and may take the participants some time to adjust.

### Pre-Story Activities

Atmosphere is important. The space for storytelling needs to be like the space at a family dinner where it is safe to share openly and to be loved and encouraged.<sup>88</sup> We do not own a church building and only rent our space in a school gym on Sunday mornings. This forces us to do mid-week ministry in homes and with small groups. Many of our groups meet for a meal prior to the storytelling session; they literally create the atmosphere of a family dinner.

Another way to set the atmosphere would be a time of worship. Even if you as leader are not musical, there are numerous worship songs available on-line. We have often used worship videos from YouTube to start our group time. After the initial activity, begin in prayer. The Holy Spirit is necessary to give both the leader and the participants insight. If you are doing this in a more formal setting in a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 1974-2009.

<sup>87</sup> Novelli, 55.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 53.

classroom, it will be helpful to have the participants sit in a circle and not in a classroom structure.<sup>89</sup>

We also have a consistent set of rules that we use with our groups. We find these to be very helpful so that everyone is following the same guidelines as questions are discussed. These are based on the rules that Jim Putman developed at Real Life church.<sup>90</sup> These can be found at the beginning of the story series at the end of this book. We have found these rules to be key in the success of the small group and review them every session.

After reviewing the rules, we begin a time of connecting. We begin by reviewing the previous story and begin to connect that story to the new story. We also connect with needs of our people. This is all accomplished by asking questions. Questions are a much better way to get people to think over a story than lecturing. Remember this should be a time of dialogue, not monologue. Think of questions as a hook and lectures as a club. As leaders, we want to hook the group to the story instead of beating them with a club.<sup>91</sup>

In the material we give to our small group leaders, there is an introduction that will provide a link to the previous stories. Then we have an icebreaker question that relates to the Bible story. This is designed to bring the participants together. This is not the only way to accomplish this. As I mentioned before, many of our groups share a meal prior to the story time. This gives them a chance to check in with one another and to share what has happened since they last met. Another option is opening in prayer and a couple worship song videos.

You may also want to engage the group by asking questions. You may want to ask a question that would connect the previous story to the new story. You could also ask a question about an issue that the group may be dealing with and that will be addressed in the story. Or you may have them listen for something specific they will hear in the story. You may want to test out all these options and see which one works best in your setting. Our advice would be to use what works best and keep it as simple as possible.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Jim Putman, *Real Life Small Group Rules*, <http://www.discipleshift.org/articles/12-guidelines-your-small-group-leader-needs-to-be-successful> Accessed June 23, 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Willis 413.

## Story

In chronological Bible storying, the Bible story is told without interruption or comment and the stories are told in chronological order of the Bible so that the overarching story becomes evident.<sup>92</sup> The most difficult thing for preachers and teachers is to overcome the habit of interjecting explanations during the story. Just tell the story.<sup>93</sup> Bring an appropriate level of energy as you tell the story but be sure the focus is on the story and not your ability to tell it. Watch your pacing and do not rush the story. Your listeners will be able to tell if you have practiced enough to make the story your own.

Story engages the brain differently than reading. Often as people listen to the story, they will hear something they did not know was in the story. This will cause them to read the text to check if what they heard was true. However, have the group keep their Bibles shut until after hearing the story. It is too hard to try to match the text with an oral story. Reading the text is one of the post-story activities.<sup>94</sup>

We have found, as did both Novelli and Willis, that Bible storying can renew interest in Bible reading. Bible storying is simple but gets the individual inside the story and it becomes part of that individual's experience and identity.<sup>95 96</sup> There is not only application from the story, there is implication. The story does not only change the outside actions of the person, there is inner transformation.<sup>97</sup>

When telling the story, it does not have to be memorized text. (See Chapter 3 on Telling a Story) Relate the Bible story to the group in the same way you would tell them a story about what happened yesterday. Do not worry if you forget part of the story, just tell the missing part when you think of it. Instead of being a negative, this sometimes helps the group remember what you forgot. Willing to admit that you did not tell the story perfectly allows you to be transparent with the

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<sup>92</sup> Novelli, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Willis, 572.

<sup>94</sup> Terry, 2972.

<sup>95</sup> Novelli, 47.

<sup>96</sup> Willis, 912.

<sup>97</sup> Novelli, 47.

group. It also allows others to see that you do not have to tell the story perfectly and gives them courage to try it themselves.<sup>98</sup>

There is something about the storying that engages the mind and heart differently than any other method of communicating the text. “Oral storytelling is the most effective means of placing story information into student memory.”<sup>99</sup> It is more effective than video, reading, having it read to you or playacting. It also requires more effort to do. One of our leaders was short on time one week and so just read the text. He was shocked at the difference between telling the story and reading it. When he changed from storying the text to reading it, his session bombed.

Story can touch at personal level, unlike lecture, because it involves emotion. “Facts are viewed from the lens of a microscope, stories are viewed from the soul.”<sup>100</sup> Storying sessions give space for the Holy Spirit to speak to each individual through God’s Word. It is interactive and develops community as participants learn from each other. Storytelling can be used to teach any learning style or age.<sup>101</sup> It is intergenerational; we have families with elementary age children in our groups. These young children participate in answering the questions and have even told the story to the adults!

## Post-Story Activities

The first thing we have our groups do after they have heard the story is to re-tell or re-build the story. The leader prompts the group in recounting the story in chronological order. If the group gets something out of order, the leader gently reminds the group that there was something else before the last suggested item. Most of the time the group members will correct each other. Other rebuilding activities such as acting out the story as it is read, puppet plays, or writing a song about the story can be used.<sup>102</sup> These are often used with children or teens.

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<sup>98</sup> Willis, 483.

<sup>99</sup> Novelli, 1896.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 42-44.

<sup>102</sup> Terry, 2245-2255.

After the story has been rebuilt, we read the actual text from the Bible. We generally share the reading, but members of the group can pass if they are not comfortable reading out loud. At this point we ask our first question: Did the storyteller miss anything or get any of the facts wrong? If something has been missed, we simply deal with it at this point.

Questions are an important part of the post-story because they develop a space to think theologically. Questions disarm people and allow participants to safely express their feelings and wonderings. They are scaffolding on which to build the skills of wondering, reflecting, and noticing, things that are often missing from traditional teaching methods. As the participants answer the questions they begin to see God in the story and how He works in them and others.<sup>103</sup>

Questions should lead to a dialogue that allows the Holy Spirit to work; do not manipulate, interpret, or explain during this time. The Bible story itself provides the boundaries to prevent this discussion from falling into relativism.<sup>104</sup> The story is the message, questions open it gently and allow it to come alive. The underlying goal is to get the members to talk to one another, not just conversation with the facilitator.

<sup>105</sup> As you begin storying, the participants may assume that you have all the answers and will wait for you to answer your questions. This is typical because often that is what happens in a traditional Bible study session. It may take time for your group to realize that they get to mull over and answer the questions. Be patient and don't fall into the trap of having to fill silence with talk.

Different storytellers categorize the questions in different manners. We have found the categories of Willis to be most useful to us. He uses three types of post story questions: "head" or knowledge of facts of the story, "heart" which deal with will and emotions, and "hands" or actions to take to apply the story. The following table has been adapted from Willis.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Novelli, 51.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 59-60.

<sup>105</sup> Willis, 536-541.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 532-534.

HEAD	HEART	HANDS
What?	Why?	How?
What About ...?	So What?	Now What?
Observations	Implication/Interpretation	Application

Novelli formulates his question types in this order: wondering about story, remember details, interpreting actions of God, and connecting to real life.<sup>107</sup>

Leading post story discussions is an art. I highly recommend the book by Karen Lee-Thorp, *How to Ask Great Questions*.<sup>108</sup> This resource explains the art of questioning better than I can address it here. It requires that you must listen to participants and Holy Spirit at the same time. Do not be afraid of silence as it gives the participants time to think. Model patience. You must be fully present to the group and listen closely. The silence between questions is not a time to daydream. Active listening is hard work. Henri Nouwen comments, “Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.”<sup>109</sup>

We ask a variety questions specific to each story in the session but also have some standard questions. Some of these include:

- What does this story tell about God?
- What does this story tell about humankind?
- Which character are you in the story?
- What do you hear God telling you in this story?
- What will you do about it?
- How is this challenging for you?
- Is there a way we can help you along the journey?

The way the individuals in the group answer the questions gives you, as leader, insight into their hearts and minds.<sup>110</sup> It is with this knowledge that you may begin

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<sup>107</sup> Novelli, 51-61.

<sup>108</sup> Karen Lee-Thorp, *How to Ask Great Questions: Guide Your Group to Discovery with These Proven Techniques* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, ©1998).

<sup>109</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 11.

<sup>110</sup> Novelli, 16.

to individualize discipleship for each person. Unless you need to head off heresy, let the group help you to lead them to accurate interpretation of the story.<sup>111</sup>

Try to involve all the people in the group, even if occasionally, you must direct a question to a specific person. Redirect tangents and discourage distracting or inappropriate questions from the group. If there is an monopolizer, have participants raise hands or direct the questions to others. Avoid questions that can be answered in one word as that will kill the discussion. Another discussion killer is asking a participant why he thinks that way. Asking a participant why or why not about a personal answer is intimidating or can be embarrassing. A less threatening phrase is: “tell me more.” Always encourage.

Correction of an individual may be better accepted from the group than from the leader. If the leader is asked a direct question, she may choose to answer it or open it up for discussion. Offer to answer “rabbit trail” questions after the group is over. The facilitator may share but never first. If the group thinks that the leader is an expert, they will stop sharing.<sup>112</sup> It has been our experience that the group will only be as honest and transparent as the leader.

## End with Prayer

We have found that a time of prayer to end the session is very helpful. If you are doing the story as an evangelistic tool, this may not be practical. We generally ask for volunteers or have the leader pray. Be aware that many people are not comfortable praying out loud. As the group becomes more comfortable with each other, we will have them break into smaller groups and request that they intentionally pray for each other. Some topics lend themselves to breaking into gender specific groups, other times mixed groups are fine.

A time of prayer before re-entering the “real world” is helpful to acknowledge that we can change only through the power of the Holy Spirit. It continues the connection with God and re-enforces the connection between individuals in the group.

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<sup>111</sup> Willis, 576.

<sup>112</sup> Novelli, 65.

## Community & Discipleship

Storytelling small groups are not the magic fix for discipleship. If the individuals in the group are not open to answering questions and are not willing to be transparent and accountable to change, there will be no growth in their faith.<sup>113</sup> Discipleship involves more than transfer of information; it's a relationship that involves being shaped by God's story and allowing God to reshape you. Through story, God gives us new eyes, and the story begins to permeate and reorder all areas of our lives.<sup>114</sup> Stories encourage the listener to adopt the values and ideals of the characters.

The group begins to have a common identity and purpose with the result that a sense of community is developed.<sup>115</sup> Within this community are supportive relationships and transparent accountability which encourages the participants to follow Jesus.<sup>116</sup>

We find twelve to be the ideal size for a small group. If you have a large group, you may have a leader tell the story and then break into smaller groups to for the post-story questions and discussions. If your group has grown and needs to split into two smaller groups, do not split until there is a leader that is ready and capable of handling a small group. As the group grows, a leader should pick an individual and begin to train them as a leader. Assign different parts to others so that they begin to lead but aren't overwhelmed. Perhaps one person can do the welcome and introduction, another the story, and another ask the questions. This way, when the time comes, the group can successfully form two smaller groups.

Bible storytelling helps build leaders. The leader of the group is a facilitator and not the expert and so everyday people are more willing to lead. Jesus intended for us to make disciples just as He did (Matt. 28:18-20) and Biblical storying is a non-threatening way to do it. Many people will not walk into a church but will go to a home of a friend. Bible storying works with all levels of spiritual knowledge and is an ideal place to invite unbelievers. People are hungry for authentic

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<sup>113</sup> Willis, 1030.

<sup>114</sup> Novelli, 43.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Willis, 630.

relationships and a Bible storytelling small group can help connect them to others and to God.<sup>117</sup>

## How often and where?

We have found that a weekly story session will allow the participants to grow in amazing ways. While this is ideal, reality is that many groups will simply not commit to this schedule. We urge our church small groups to meet at least twice per month. This gives busy families a little more space in their schedule but also allows relational contact with other members of the group.

We have also found that it is best to set a consistent time and date. When the groups have attempted to accommodate everyone's schedule, then the groups meet less often and have less commitment to each other. We would suggest something like the second and fourth Tuesday of the month at 6:30. This allows planning and a standard time to invite others into the group.

Because storying is appropriate for any spiritual level, these groups are an ideal place to invite friends. You don't have to know anything about the Bible to be a part of the group. It is a non-threatening way to introduce people to what the Bible really says, who God is, and who they are in God's sight. It gives opportunity for other Christians to love on them and pray for them.

Since our church only rents our worship space on Sunday morning, most of our small groups meet in homes. Some groups meet at the same home every time, other groups may rotate homes and hostess duties. We have also led groups in coffee shops. Some restaurants will allow you to use a back room if you purchase food there.

We have also been excited about groups that meet in the marketplace. We have a couple friends who own businesses and want to act out their faith with their staff but who also don't want to beat the workers over the head with a Bible. Storying groups are a good fit for this. The group time is optional, but often the owners pay for the employee's time and offer a meal. That is incentive to listen to a story. In

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<sup>117</sup> Willis, 1395.

our experience, these workers may not say anything, but they are still listening and thinking. Even if the questions are not answered out loud, the individuals usually answer them in their minds. We have observed that many who have participated in these groups have been disciplined to faith. The story allows the Holy Spirit to bring these people to faith, and we have had the honor of baptizing several members of these groups.

### Example of a story telling group

Taylor University has a good video on a storying small group. There is an example of a group and then a discussion on how this methodology has influenced the participants.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/scripture-engagement/storying-scripture/example>

## Chapter 5 Storytelling Sermons

We began to use storytelling small groups for our discipleship format after experiencing it ourselves. It was amazing that storytelling was such a powerful communication tool. Why not use it for sermons, also? Much of preaching is more like a lecture where the Bible is fit into the presentation and it becomes an informed speech with scriptural principles. If the Bible is really the living Word, shouldn't we be able to learn from it directly and shouldn't our people be able to seek the Lord through it? We had many questions but not many answers.

We did know that only ten percent of lecture is retained by a student. From what we had learned in our research about storying, the Bible is seventy-five percent narrative, fifteen percent poetry and ten percent instructional. Poetry stimulates our brains in a similar manner to story.<sup>118</sup> So we can see that ninety percent of the Bible can be integrated into our brains well when told like a story. However, a sermon is an instructional monologue.

We have mistakenly assumed that we could make disciples by preaching sermons to them. I agree with Avery Willis, "Trying to make disciples through preaching is like spraying milk over a nursery full of screaming babies just hoping some of it falls into their mouths."<sup>119</sup> Preaching can teach and inspire but discipling is best accomplished in the small group. However, that does not mean that preaching cannot support the small group effort.

We came from a tradition that used lectionary readings that were repeated on a three-year cycle. This system was instituted with the good intention of guiding a balanced preaching of the Bible. Unfortunately, the lessons rarely connected with each other. The Psalm, Old Testament lesson, Epistle lesson and the Gospel would all be on separate topics. In our experience, most pastors preached from the Gospels, so the congregation would hear the same lessons every three years. We even had pastor friends who just kept a file of their sermons and would repeat them every rotation. The use of these lectionary texts fragments the Bible. Most people in the pews today do not understand how the Scripture tells the story of God.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Thompson, 103.

<sup>119</sup> Willis, 715.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 1579.

As pastors, we want our people to grow in Bible knowledge, but we are the ones that do the work of digging into the Bible. Michael Novelli makes a great point when he says,

For years the church has taught scattered, random bits of Biblical knowledge but few remember these bits. Preachers become like momma birds, predigesting the Scripture and then regurgitating it back to the congregation in bite sized pieces. Maybe they will take nourishment or maybe they will spew it back.<sup>121</sup>

Our congregations need to be able to feed themselves.

The expository methodology is what we know and have invested effort into and so it is hard to let go and change methodology.<sup>122</sup> Both of us were taught to prepare our sermons in a similar way. We would pick the text from the lectionary, read it, and ask ourselves a few questions about it. Then we might study a couple key words in the original language and read what the commentaries had to say. From that we would summarize the points of the text and bring in other illustrations to help make the sermon memorable. We were often disappointed when the listeners could only remember the illustrations and had no idea what the text said. In fact, even as the preachers of the message, we had trouble remembering what we said using this type of methodology! This points to a need to reclaim story as a communication tool for God's word.

In the old method as we preached we assumed that our congregation already knew the story and we would insult their intelligence by repeating it. Over time, we have come to realize that the congregations that we have served really do not know as much of the Bible as we thought they did. When we remove the elements of the story: context, details, and dialogue, we also remove the structure that helps our people remember the truth contained in the story. We forgot that Jesus communicated the most profound truths through story.<sup>123</sup>

Now we have discarded the lectionary system. We pick texts around a subject and find both Old Testament and New Testament stories to illustrate how God works throughout Scripture. Or we may alternate an Old Testament series with a

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<sup>121</sup> Novelli, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Novelli, 8.

<sup>123</sup> Willis, 306.

New Testament series. Our sermon series are between four and ten weeks in length depending on the topic and season of the year. Context is extremely important as we link the individual stories to show an even larger story. Our congregation has greatly appreciated the context. They have now begun to understand how the Bible fits together to form God's metanarrative.

We have also changed how we prepare our sermons. First, we learn the story and consider its context. As we learn the story, it gives space for us to meditate on the Word. We find ourselves having conversations with God as we consider what the story means. We first get our insights on the story from the Holy Spirit. Then we will do our due diligence to check key words in the original language and consider what the commentaries have to say. Although, many of our key thoughts come from the Holy Spirit and not from other scholars. We also consider the questions that we would ask in our small groups for this text. Through prayerful consideration, we generally pick three questions and answers for the sermon that we think will be helpful for our church.

We use the story itself to explain the points. This saves time trying to find an attention-grabbing story to illustrate our thoughts. By using the story itself to illustrate the points, our congregation remembers the Bible text, not the supporting stories. Even if they can't recite the points of the sermon afterwards, they can remember the story. When they remember the story, they begin to remember the points and can start applying these to their daily living.

At first it seemed that these sermons were too simplistic, and we wondered if we were depriving our people of good teaching. Storytelling sermons are much easier to remember and preach. We found that our congregation loved it. The children were engaged because we were telling a story they could understand. The adults loved the context. They were beginning to understand how the stories of the Bible connected and theologically, the Bible was making more sense to them. People felt safe inviting unbelievers to church because the story is non-confrontational, and the truth can slip into hearts and minds under the radar. Everyone can learn from a story, and stories travel better than sermon outlines or a fill in the blank study guide.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 1412.

This methodology does take time. It works best if we learn the story at the beginning of the week. In the old way, we could write a sermon in a few hours if we had to. Now it works much better if we meditate over the story several days. Each week we wonder if this will really work, but it does consistently.

Using story telling preaching also helps us connect the story from the small groups with the worship service. As we started with storying, we would preach on one text and the small groups would use a supporting story. We were afraid that if we used the same text both on Sunday morning and during the week that it would be overkill. We found out that it is not. Using the same text for Sunday school, small groups, and the sermon has actually helped our congregation know and remember the story better.

## Storytelling Sermon Examples

We livestream our church service which saves the service as a video. We then take the video of our service and crop it to the sermon only. This is put into a video blog. If you would like to see examples of our sermons click here:

<https://lightofchristnetwork.podbean.com/>

## Chapter 6 Drawbacks of Storytelling

While storying scripture has been very helpful, nothing on this earth is perfect. One of the biggest drawbacks we have experienced in storytelling is the word “story” which has a broad and vague meaning. The English language does not have many words to describe the different levels of story.<sup>125</sup> The word “story” can be used to describe anything from a children’s fable, to a lie, to a personal testimony, to a portion of text in the Bible.

Americans tend to assume a story is false, made up and consists of lies. In contrast, facts must be true. Most people think stories exaggerate and so are for kids and should be set aside by adults. A story is suspect because, in most people’s minds, it consists of myth and fable. It is widely assumed that it would be inappropriate to use story in church because it is fluffy and for entertainment only.<sup>126</sup>

Story is a structure that holds content which can be true or false. Even as science about story is coming out, society refuses to take the communication power of story seriously.<sup>127</sup> Kendall Haven says, “stories create realities so compelling that they shape our experience not only in the world of the story, but of the real world.”<sup>128</sup> Everyday our minds use story to understand and make sense of the world events and people around us, why not harness its communication power to tell the good news of Christ?

There is also a fear that Biblical storytelling will distort the Bible like a game of “Telephone” distorts a message. In the game of Telephone, where one-person whispers into the ear of another and passes the message down the line, the message almost always comes out garbled. In the game, the message is passed on secretly, however, in Biblical storying the message is passed out in the open. The community that hears the story will not allow it to be distorted.<sup>129</sup> I have personally observed members of a group correct an individual that was twisting the message.

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<sup>125</sup> Haven, 247.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 314-322.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>129</sup> Novelli, 49.

We also encourage the Bible text to be read in addition to listening to the story. It has been my experience that the oral storytelling encourages more Bible reading.

Story provides a structure which promotes memory and recall but this advantage comes at a price. Haven describes this price well when he says, “Stories require more verbiage, more time, and more developmental effort.”<sup>130</sup> It does require hard work to learn the story. Story is done best when it is tailored for the group. There are a few storying sets that are available for purchase, but generally, even these should be tweaked to fit the audience. It is much easier to lead a “plug and play” DVD video with a workbook, but this type of Bible study does not yield the results of storytelling.

We have also experienced spiritual opposition as we try to learn the story. It will be difficult to make ourselves sit down and learn the story. We may get sleepy or have unusual distractions interfere. The leaders of our small groups also experienced a similar thing when they are learning the stories. Storying is so powerful that the enemy does not want it to happen. We have begun to instruct our small groups to be sure to pray for the individual learning the story for the next time. We, as pastors, have experienced this kind of interference before. Many of our small group people have not; it is something that is unexpected. It is a spiritual battle and it must be fought with the spiritual weapon of prayer.

Other pastors have accused us not teaching the Bible correctly. “How can you possibly teach the Epistles?” they ask. It is true the Epistles for the most part do not read as a story. However, they are based on the stories of the Old Testament and the Gospels. The Epistles provide commentary on the story of Jesus not the other way around.

The Epistles are letters and as such, they are like listening to one half of a telephone conversation. Many times, the story of the different churches can be inferred from what the letter writer says. Other times insight can be gained from the history in Acts. It is also possible to search secular historians to find more about the times and places of the Epistles. But with some effort, the story of the Epistles can be told.

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<sup>130</sup> Haven, 1228.

Storytelling can also get messy because it deals with relationships in the discipleship process. It exposes worldview and challenges one to change. There will be some that don't want to change. It is chaotic and not for the faint of heart. There is a spiritual battle for souls in our world and the kingdom of darkness does not give up its territory easily. The Holy Spirit is unpredictable and uncontrollable; the process may turn out differently than you expect. Biblical storytelling will challenge everything you have practiced as a Bible teacher, but it will also strengthen every doctrinal truth.<sup>131</sup>

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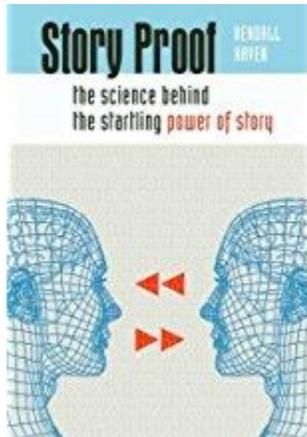
<sup>131</sup> Willis, 41-49.

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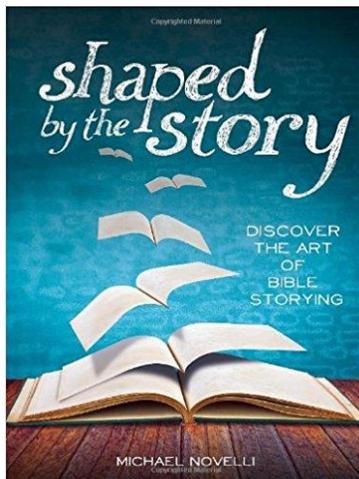
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## Resources:

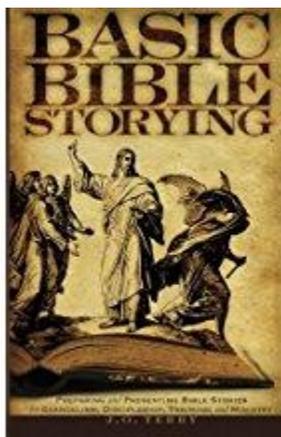
Click on the picture of the book to learn more.



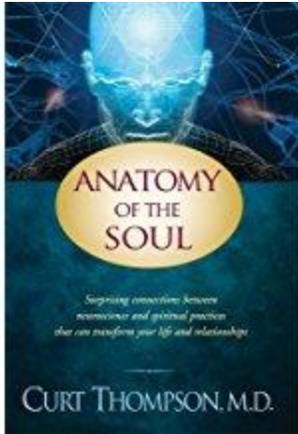
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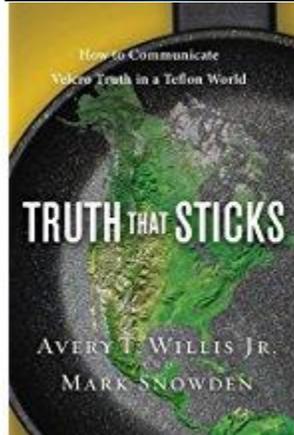
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### **Other Helpful Books:**

Dillon, Christine. *Telling the Gospel through Story: Evangelism That Keeps Hearers Wanting More*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2012.

Goheen, Michael W. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, ©2011.

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## Part 3 - Story Series Example

The Divine Intrude Story Series is an example of the form of storying that works best in our setting. These six stories are not the only stories in the Bible where God intrudes into people's lives. There are many, many more. These happened to work well for us. You will notice that there are three Old Testament stories and three New Testament stories. It becomes evident that God has always been able to break into His creation's lives. It helped our community see that these individual stories tell a larger story of how God works and who God is.

The form for the small group is very simple. We find that the basic form can easily be adapted for various groups. The early elementary age Sunday school class will need to be modified to reach an age group that does not yet read and has a very short attention span. We will only pick a few questions to ask and then proceed to an activity picked from the Sunday school activity menu. This allows each group to be able to use activities that match their needs and tastes. The teen group may want to rebuild the story by acting it out, while the Tuesday afternoon group of retirees may be perfectly happy just to sit still.

As the facilitator of a group, you will know the group best. There is never a program that can be a one-size-fits-all. The beauty of storying is that it can be very easily adapted for a group. Even groups within the same type of setting may be very different. The first elementary Sunday school group I used storying with loved music. We often made up songs to re-tell the story. The current group I teach would rather eat dryer lint than sing, so we play games to help them remember and process the story. The specific activity is not important. Time to process what the story says is the primary focus. Activities that allow for repetition of the story will help make it more memorable.

You will notice that the written sermons vary by author, also. Tom and I have very different preaching styles. Tom writes down a general outline and adds things as he preaches. I am more comfortable writing things out. Even though my written sermons appear longer, when preached, these sermons were about twenty-five minutes long.

## **Sunday School Menu:**

These are activities that can be used to tailor a storying session. It is called a menu because that is exactly what it is. Just as you have a choice to pick the meal you would like at a restaurant, so here you can pick appropriate activities to help your group, no matter the age, learn the story.

### **Pre-Story:**

Worship songs

Ice breaker questions

An analogous story from today to match the Bible story

“Checking in” – How are you? Time

### **Rebuilding Story:**

Act out story – either teacher reading the story and kids acting it out, or vice versa

Power point pictures – have a set of slides that picture the story and have the

kids retell it. <http://www.freebibleimages.org/> is a helpful site.

Create a song – use a familiar melody and tell the story that way

Draw the story – have the kids draw the whole story or assign parts of the story to draw

Find the Mistake – after the story has been told and rebuilt, the instructor prepares the children by telling them to listen for the mistake. Then she retells the story with purposeful mistakes so that the children must find them.

Make up actions to go with the story.

### **Post – Story Activities**

#### **Question Topple Game**

May use for each individual or in teams. For each correct answer to a question a domino may be set up. When all the dominos are set up or questions are done, the dominos may be toppled.

#### **Sticky Note Review Game**

Before class put each “scene” of the story on a series of sticky notes. Mix them up and have the kids put them in the right order.

Variation 1: hide the sticky notes around the room so that the kids must find them before they are put in the right order.

Variation 2: leave out a scene and see if the kids can tell you what is missing.

### Who Am I Game

Before class write names of people or objects from the Bible story on sticky notes. Example: for Daniel in the Lion's Den you could write Daniel, lion, king, ect.

In class put a sticky not on each child's forehead. Tell the kids not to tell anyone what is written on their foreheads and not to remove the sticky notes. Have the kids sit in a circle.

Take turns asking only yes or no questions of the other kids to figure out what is written on the sticky note. Keep going around the circle until all the kids have guessed their word

### Collect Sticky Notes

Before class write words that belong to the lesson and some words that don't belong to the story on sticky notes. Place all the sticky notes in the center of the table.

After the story has been told and rebuilt, have the children take turns picking one word that belongs to the story. See who can get the most correct words.

### Guess the Story Game

Before class cover a coloring sheet or picture from a previous story with sticky notes. After the story is told and rebuilt, have the children take turns answering questions about the story. Each correct answer earns the child the chance to remove one sticky note, and the chance to guess what the picture is. Keep playing until the story is guessed correctly. This also gives a chance to connect the story of the day with a previous story.

### Concentration

Before class choose some words that connect with the story. Write each word on two index cards making sure the writing does not show through to the backside. (will need a set for every 4 or 5 kids)

To play, mix the cards up and place face down on a table in rows. Have the children take turns turning over two cards to see if they match. If they do match, the child who turned over the cards gets to keep them and take another turn. If they don't match the child has to turn them back over and the next child takes a turn. The player with the most cards at the end of the game wins.

Variation: take a picture or coloring sheet from a past story and place under the cards so that in addition to matching the cards, they can also guess the story.

### Guess the Word Game

Before class write words relating to your Bible lessons on index cards. Pick a child to start the game, this child picks a card and reads the word to himself. The other children take turns asking one yes or no question and then try to guess what the word on the card is. The child who guesses correctly gets to pick the next card and the game continues.

### Word Charades

Before class write out words or phrases from the story on index cards. Make sure they are something that can be acted out. Have each child pick a card and take turns acting out the words or phrases and the other children try to guess what it is.

### Hangman

Play hangman with words from the Bible story.

### Words on My Foot Relay

Before class write scenes of the story on index cards. If there is more than one team, each team will need a set.

To play, mark off a start and finish line. Mix the cards and place at the start line. The child at the start of the line places a scene card on top of her shoe. This is the only time they may touch the card. Then the child tries to walk across to the finish line without dropping the card. If the child drops the card, another teammate must pick it up and place it back on the player's shoe. The player may not touch the card with her hands to pick it up. Then the next child does the same until all the cards are at the finish line. When all the cards are at the finish line, the team must put them into order.

### Line Up in Order

For this you need the same number of cards and students. Divide the scenes and write each on index cards. Mix these cards up and give one to each child. On the word "Go" the children should line up so that the scenes are in order. This can be timed. Turn the cards in, mix them, and hand them out again to see if the children can better their time.

Variation: The children are not allowed to see their own card but must have it taped to their forehead. They must figure out where they belong with help from the other children. They are not to tell what is written, only where they belong in line.

### Drinking Straws and Scene Cards

Make a set of index cards with the scenes from the story for each child. Give each player a straw and a set of cards. Mix the cards and set them out face up in front of each child. The child must use only the drinking straw to blow the cards into the correct order.

Variation: May remove a card from each set and let the kids try to figure out which scene is missing.

### Tic-Tac-Toe

Divide the children into two teams. A correct answer earns the right to mark an “X” or “O” in a tic-tac-toe board.

Variation: Instead of playing on paper, use a grid of masking tape on the floor and beanbags.

### Twister

Before class change each color to a word or phrase from the story. Play like twister but instead of calling out the color, call out the word or phrase from the story.

### Musical Chairs

Play musical chairs in the normal way, except the child without a chair must answer a question. If they answer correctly they may stay in the game. Continue until there is a winner.

### Relay Race

Find objects that match the story. Will need a set of objects for each team. The class may be divided into teams to race against each other or if there is a small class, they may only have one team who races against the clock.

Variations: instead of simple running back and forth change mode of movement – walk backward, hop, skip, or crab-walk back and forth.

### Chopsticks

Before class write the scenes of the story on index cards, one set for each team in the class. Fold up the corners or slightly wrinkle the paper. In class give each child a set of chopsticks. Mix up the cards. The first child in line must grab a card and the card must be passed down the line only using the chopsticks. The last

person in line must put the cards in order. First team to do this correctly wins. Or if there is only one team, they can race against the clock.

Variation: only let them use one hand with the chopsticks.

### Put in Order with Beanbag

Make a set of cards with the scenes from the story for each team. Tape these on the floor and mark a place for the child to toss the bag. In class have the teams attempt to toss the bean bags onto the scenes in order. Each child takes one turn. The object is to hit the scenes in order. Example: a bean bag must hit scene one, then scene two must be hit before attempting scene three and so on.

### Coloring Pages, Mazes, and Similar Activities

These types of paper activities can be found in abundance on the internet. We also subscribe to a service that provides coloring pages, mazes, and crossword puzzles. We always had out a coloring page for the younger children. We don't own the rights to these and so did not include them in the curriculum.

## Small Group Guidelines<sup>132</sup>

We want the participants to understand why they are here and to lay a foundation of the guidelines for small group's discussions. It is helpful to go over these guidelines briefly every time your huddle meets.

**SAFE ENVIRONMENT:** This needs to be a place where people feel comfortable opening up and sharing with one another. Below are some guidelines that will help create a safe environment:

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** What is said in the group stays in the group.

**LISTEN:** Let's value one another during the discussion by really listening to what is being shared. Try to avoid thinking about how you are going to respond, or what you are going to say next.

**PAUSE:** Allow a pause in conversation after someone shares. Give the person sharing the chance to finish and the group the opportunity to consider what was just shared before responding.

**SILENCE:** It is important to allow silence in the group as it provides an opportunity for someone to share and for members in the group to process the topic or question being considered.

**NO "CROSS TALK":** Be considerate of others as they are sharing. No side conversations.

**NO FIXING:** We are not here to fix each other. Jesus does that part. Give encouragement; speak truth, point to Jesus. Don't try to solve problems or fix each other.

**NO RESCUING:** When people are sharing something deeply personal, there can be a tendency to try to make them feel better about themselves or the situation by providing immediate condolences. This will often cause them to stop sharing. Resist the temptation to rescue people.

**SHARING:** Be sensitive about the amount of time you share.

**BE SELF-AWARE:** Be self-aware of how you are personally affecting the environment through your words, actions, and non-verbal communication.

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<sup>132</sup> Adapted from Jim Putnam's *Discipleshift1, Training Manuel*, (Post Falls, ID: Real Life Ministries). Also see: <http://www.discipleshift.org/articles/12-guidelines-your-small-group-leader-needs-to-be-successful>.

**“I” STATEMENTS:** It’s easy to talk about the issues of others, but for our purposes, we want you to put yourself on the table. Try to use “I” statements rather than “them”, “the church,” “us” “we”, etc.

**LISTEN TO THE STORY:** When the story is being presented the most effective way to understand the story at this point is just listen...don’t try to follow along in your bible. Opening the Bible will come later.

**CONFLICT:** We will commit to resolve conflict Biblically. When conflict or sin issues between group members arise, we want to make sure that we are honoring God and each other in the way we deal with these issues. The following are a few key Scriptures in this regard (there are many others)

- If someone sins against you: Matthew 18:15-20
- Restoring someone in sin: Galatians 6:1-5
- Forgive a sinner: Colossians 3:12-13
- Reconciling differences: Matthew 5:23-24, Matthew 7:1-5

## Divine Intruder Story Series

Often an intruder is thought of in a negative sense, such as a robber who breaks into a house. In this story series the intruder is divine. God, our creator, has the right to break into our lives. When He does intrude it is often to intervene. In this story set you will see the hand of God intervening in the lives of His people.

The Lord still intervenes. When Tom was 27 he was broadsided as he drove to work. The other driver had just passed a school bus and then hit Tom as he was making a left turn. Tom was almost stopped as he was making his turn, but the other driver was going 70 mph and never braked. Tom's car was pushed 150 feet down the road. To survive that type of crash without being hurt was divine intervention. The state trooper commented, "In this kind of accident there is usually no need for an ambulance because the driver is no longer living." After that Tom felt every day of his life was like a bonus as he had encountered the Divine Intruder.



## Story 1 – Gideon – Small Group

Begin in prayer. Review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: We think of intruders as a negative thing such as a robber breaking into our house. In this story series, we will see that it can be positive. God, as our creator, has the right to intrude into our lives, even when He is unexpected and unwelcome. At first, we may not like this intrusion but often God intervenes for our good and for our rescue. God joins us in our weakest and worst moments. The world is not a safe place after all, if by safe we mean safe from visitations of the Holy One. There is a Divine Intruder among us.

Icebreaker Question: Tell about a time when you were picked for a task where you felt inadequate.

Context: God had saved His people from slavery in Egypt, guided them through the desert for 40 years. Then they entered the promised land and God helped them overcome their enemies. God wanted to be the nation's ruler, but after a while the people forgot about God and worshiped false gods. This sin always had consequences. God wanted His people to follow Him. At the time of our story, Israel had been back in the promised land for about 200 years.

### **A story from the Word of God: Judges 6:1-14**

Again, the Israelites did what the Lord said was wrong. So, for seven years the Lord allowed the Midianites, their enemies, to defeat the Israelites. The Midianites were very powerful and were cruel to the Israelites by taking all their food. They destroyed Israel's crops and came with their families and animals and ate what was left.

The Israelites tried to hide food in caves, but they became very poor. Finally, they cried out to the Lord for help. The Lord responded through a prophet to them and said, "I am Your God and saved you out of Egypt. I gave you your freedom and your land. I told you to worship me and not the idols of those who lived here before you. But you have forgotten Me, and worshipped idols."

Gideon lived in the central part of Israel but belonged to a small insignificant clan. He was trying to thresh wheat in a winepress to hide the wheat

from the Midianites. Then an angel from the Lord appeared to him and said, “The Lord be with you, brave soldier.”

Then Gideon said, “Pardon me, sir, but if the Lord is with us, why are we having so many troubles? We heard that he did wonderful things for our ancestors. They tell us that the Lord took them out of Egypt. But now it seems the Lord has left us and is letting the Midianites defeat us.”

The Lord turned toward Gideon and said, “Then use your great power and go save the Israelites from the Midianites. I am sending you to save them.”

But Gideon answered and said, “Pardon me, sir. How can I save Israel? My family clan is the weakest in my tribe and I am the youngest one in my family.”

The Lord answered Gideon and said, “I will be with you, so you can defeat the Midianites as easily as if they were only one man.”

Then Gideon said to him, “If you would, please give me some proof that you really are the Lord. Please wait here. Don’t go away until I come back to you. Let me bring my offering and set it down in front of you.”

And the Lord said, “I will wait until you come back.”

Gideon went and prepared bread and goat meat and brought it back and gave them to the Lord. The angel of God said to Gideon, “Put the meat and the bread on that rock over there. Then pour the broth on it.” Gideon did as he was told.

The angel of the Lord had a walking stick in his hand. He touched the meat and the bread with the end of the stick, and fire jumped up out of the rock and burned up the meat and the bread. Then the angel of the Lord disappeared.

Then Gideon realized that he had been talking to the angel of the Lord. So, he shouted, “Oh, Lord God! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!

But the Lord said to Gideon, “Calm down! Don’t be afraid! You will not die!” The Lord was with Gideon and he eventually would defeat the Midianites. (Adapted from ERV)

A Story from the Word of God

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

Head Questions: (Get the facts straight)

- What was the problem with worship in our story?
- What were the consequences of following idols?
- How long did it take for the people to cry out to the Lord?
- What did the Lord have to say?
- Who was chosen to lead the army?
- What was Gideon's reaction to the angel?

Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

- Why do you think it took 7 years for the people to finally ask God for help?
- How do you think the people received the message from the Lord?
- If you had been a citizen of Israel, how would you have received the message from the Lord?
- Have you ever received a message of correction from the Lord? Share if you are comfortable.
- What was God's design for worship in our story? Now?
- A wine press is a pit to collect juice from grapes as they are squeezed. When you thresh wheat, you need a breeze to blow away the chaff. How difficult would it be to thresh wheat in a wine press?
- How desperate do you think Gideon was to do that?
- How does Gideon respond to the angel?
- What does his first question show about why he thought the nation was having problems?
- Do you think God abandoned the nation to their enemies? Why or why not?
- What was farm-boy Gideon to do about the situation?
- How do you think Gideon felt?
- How would you have felt?
- How did the way people saw Gideon compare with how the Lord saw Gideon?
- What does this say about how God calls us to tasks?
- How patient was the Lord with Gideon asking for confirmation?
- What does that have to say to us when we need confirmation from the Lord?
- What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

Hands Questions: (Application)

- What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?
- What changes will you have to make to do that application?

How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?  
What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 1 – Gideon – Sermon

**Gideon and the Divine Intruder - Text: Judges: 6:1-24**

**Sermon Title: *When I am Weak You are Strong* by Tom Graves**

To set the context for our story about Gideon we need to understand that the time of the Judges was after Joshua and before Israel's first king, King Saul. Each Judge that the Lord would raise up was in many ways a ruler, but Judges did not follow family lines.

The book of Judges is disturbingly relevant to today as it records the Israelites' descent into sin and its terrible consequences, much like our nation today. Judges is a harsh reminder that God punishes sin but is always ready to take the repentant back into his arms. Contrasted greatly with the victorious book of Joshua that precedes it, Judges shows the failure of Israel to conquer their enemies, claim their inheritance, and the huge effect that this had on their life and relationship with God. Throughout this entire book, we see a repeated cycle, one that we will call 'The cycle of sin'.

### **The Cycle of Sin Defined**

**Judges 2:18-19** "Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways." In these two verses we find the pattern for the entire book – a pattern of sin, bondage and repentance that would last for nearly 350 years (around 1380 to 1050 BC).

**And now a story from God's word** about the Judge the Lord raises into leadership named Gideon.

Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. <sup>2</sup> Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. <sup>3</sup> Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. <sup>4</sup> They camped on the

land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. <sup>5</sup> They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. <sup>6</sup> Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.

<sup>7</sup> When the Israelites cried to the Lord because of Midian, <sup>8</sup> he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>9</sup> I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. <sup>10</sup> I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.”

<sup>11</sup> The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. <sup>12</sup> When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

<sup>13</sup> “But sir,” Gideon replied, “if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.”

<sup>14</sup> The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

<sup>15</sup> “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

<sup>16</sup> The Lord answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.”

<sup>17</sup> Gideon replied, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. <sup>18</sup> Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you.”

And the Lord said, “I will wait until you return.”

<sup>19</sup> Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

<sup>20</sup> The angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And Gideon did so. <sup>21</sup> With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the Lord disappeared. <sup>22</sup> When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, “Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!”

<sup>23</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.”

<sup>24</sup> So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The Lord is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (NIV) A story from God’s word.

As we look at the first six verses of our story, we see the results of a people who have drifted away from God and have done evil in the sight of the Lord. In God’s infinite wisdom, He does not let them stay in their sin; He intervenes. He is the Divine Intruder. The first part of our Lord’s intervention comes by allowing the Midianites to oppress the Israelites. But because of their stubbornness, it takes them seven years to humble themselves to cry out to the Lord. It says in verse six that Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord. The interesting part of this that in verse one it says the Lord has done this for seven years. It took them seven years before they finally humbled themselves before the Lord.

The question I asked myself is: “Why did it take seven years for them to humble themselves?” The answer I believe is when we stair step down into sin, it numbs us to the voice of God that is calling us to repent. It is like we are deaf to the Lord. One of the ways the Lord can bring us to our senses is to let us experience the hardship caused by our own sin. It is this hardship that can get our attention and humble us. Was there ever a time in your life where the Lord used hardship? When did He use a very difficult situation or a time of desperation to get your attention that resulted in you crying out to God? When did you finally say: Lord help me. I have made such a mess of life; Lord forgive me. **When I repent of**

**my sin and cry out to the Lord something begins to happen to my deafened ears to the Lord. I begin to hear the Lord's voice again.**

In the next part of our story, we see Israel finally calls out to the Lord. We see the Lord responds by sending them a prophet who reminds them of what the Lord did for the nation of Israel by taking them out of Egypt. The Lord reminds them of where they were and how oppressed they were, yet He rescued them. How many times in the Bible does the Lord remind the people of Israel what he has done for them? Each time we take the Lord's supper we are reminded by these words from 1 Cor. 11:24, "and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." What is the Lord saying to us? We soon forget what He has done for us. Then we often fall into discouragement and wonder where the Lord is.

The Lord often reminds us of who He is and what He has done for us. This is to call us upward to take our focus off ourselves and to place it on him. When we do this, it changes our entire perspective.

As we continue with our story the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon saying to him, "The Lord is with you mighty warrior." Although at this time in his life Gideon was not a mighty warrior, the Lord was speaking truth into his life. When Gideon hears this, he is filled with doubt and says to the angel of the Lord, "but sir, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" The Lord in turn responds, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

All of us are a little bit like Gideon. God is calling us to do wondrous things in the Kingdom of God and we have a laundry list of why we can't do what the Lord is calling us to do. But realize the Lord does not ask us to do his work in our own strength. In fact, the Lord likes to put us in a place where we have to depend on him.

We remember the children's song, *Jesus Loves Me*, that has been loved among children and adults alike since it was written in 1860. Anna B. Warner wrote the original version and later David Rutherford McGuire added stanzas two and three. Anna's sister Susan had asked her to write a song for a Sunday School teacher who wanted to cheer a dying boy. Although the boy was dying and had no strength of

his own he was strong in Jesus. No wonder the lyrics have brought a smile to many children and assurance to adults!

It says in 2 Cor. 12: 9-10 “But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Also, we remember the verses from 1 Cor. 2:1-5, “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

Our thought for this part of the story is “**Lord, when I am weak you are strong.**”

As we conclude the story, Gideon like many people is filled with doubt, but God meets us like Gideon. God meets us where we are. Are you filled with doubt? Begin to focus on the words of God such as the following:

Hebrews 13:6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 4:6-7 “Don’t worry about anything, but pray and ask God for everything you need, always giving thanks for what you have. <sup>7</sup> And because you belong to Christ Jesus, God’s peace will stand guard over all your thoughts and feelings. His peace can do this far better than our human minds.”

Psalms 34:4 “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”

To God be the glory, amen.

## Story 2 – Ruth and Naomi – Small Group

Begin in prayer and review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: Last week we saw how God broke into Gideon’s life to use him to save the nation from its enemies. Sometimes God is working even when it does not feel like it. In the instance of Gideon, the Lord came suddenly with a task. In our story today, God will come in a series of small steps.

Icebreaker Question: Tell about a time when it seemed like God was against you.

Context: Our story happens during the time of Judges. Israel was a nation but was not yet ruled by a king. Israel was an agrarian nation and very dependent on the crops. The land was subject to droughts and that would lead to famines. To avoid starving, people would move to where they could find food. In this culture, it was the males of the family that could earn a living. A female without males to provide would be poverty stricken.

### **A Story from the Word of God: Ruth 1**

Long ago, during the time the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man left the town of Bethlehem in Judah. He, his wife, and his two sons moved to the country of Moab, which was east of Israel. The man’s wife was named Naomi.

Later, Naomi’s husband died, so only Naomi and her two sons were left. Her sons married women from the country of Moab. They lived in Moab about ten years; then the sons also died. So, Naomi was left alone without her husband or her two sons.

Then Naomi heard that the Lord had helped His people and that the famine was over. So, Naomi decided to leave the hill country of Moab and go back home. Her daughters-in-law also decided to go with her. They left the place where they had been living and started walking back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi told her daughters-in-law, “Each of you should go back home to your mother. You have been very kind to me and my sons who are now dead. So, I pray that the Lord will be just as kind to you. I pray that the Lord will help

each of you find a husband and a good home.” Naomi kissed her daughters-in-law, and they all started crying.

Then the daughters said, “But we want to come with you and go to your family.”

But Naomi said, “Why would you stay with me? I can’t provide any more sons for you. No, daughters, go back to your own homes. I am sad—the Lord has done many things to me!”

So again, they cried very much. Then one daughter-in-law kissed Naomi goodbye, but the daughter-in-law named Ruth hugged her and stayed.

Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her own people and her own gods. You should do the same.”

But Ruth said, “Don’t force me to leave you! Don’t force me to go back to my own people. Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you sleep, I will sleep. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and that is where I will be buried. I ask the Lord to punish me if I don’t keep this promise: Only death will separate us.”

Naomi saw that Ruth wanted very much to go with her. So, Naomi stopped arguing with her. Naomi and Ruth traveled until they came to the town of Bethlehem. When the two women entered Bethlehem, all the people were very excited. They said, “Is this Naomi?”

But Naomi told the people, “Don’t call me Naomi; call me Marah, or Bitter. Use this name because God All-Powerful has made my life very sad. I had everything I wanted when I left, but now, the Lord brings me home with nothing. The Lord has made me sad, so why should you call me Naomi which means happy? God All-Powerful has given much trouble to me.”

So, Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, the Moabite, came back from the hill country of Moab. These two women came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This would be a harvest in which God would not only bring them food, but family. (from ERV, names simplified)

A story from the Word of God

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

Head Questions: (get the facts straight)

What caused Naomi to leave the nation of Israel?

What happened to the family while they lived in Moab?

What caused Naomi to begin the trip home?

Why did she tell her daughters-in-law to return to their family homes?

Why did Ruth refuse?

What does Naomi tell her friends when they return to her hometown?

Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

How do you think Naomi would describe the Divine Intruder in this story?

What does her desire for a name change at the end of the story tell you about her mental state?

The Moabites were idol worshippers, what do you think is Ruth's spiritual state from her comments to Naomi?

Contrast Ruth's attitude toward God versus Naomi's attitude toward God.

How do you think Ruth would describe the Divine Intruder in this story?

How would you feel if you were Naomi in this story? Ruth?

If you were a character in this story, who would you be and why?

What do you like about the story? Dislike?

The story continues, and God provides Ruth with a husband and child and through this provides provision for Naomi. How would Naomi's attitude be changed then?

What does this tell us about not quitting too soon?

What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

Hands Questions: (Application)

What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?

What changes will you have to make to do that application?

How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?

What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 2 – Ruth and Naomi - Sermon

**Ruth, Naomi, and the Divine Intruder - Text: Ruth 1:1-22**

**Sermon Title: *The Hand of the Lord is Upon Me* by Tom Graves**

Today we will see how the Lord intrudes into the life of Ruth. But first, let me set the context of our story. Context: This story takes place during the time of the Judges, which ruled Israel for about 400 years prior to Israel having Kings. Our story reveals the Lord's faithfulness, even when we don't realize how faithful He is, He is always with us. Sometimes years must go by and then we are able to see the Lord's hand was upon us during the times where He seemed far away.

### **A Story from the Word of God:**

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. <sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

<sup>3</sup> Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup> When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. <sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud <sup>10</sup> and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?” <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— <sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has gone out against me!”

<sup>14</sup> At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

<sup>19</sup> So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

<sup>20</sup> “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup> I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. (NIV)  
A Story from the Word of God

In chapter one let’s examine what has happened to Naomi over the last ten years. She lost her husband Elimelech, her sons Mahlon and Kilion, and she has moved to a foreign country for a better life and that did not turn out. After all that, she says the Lord’s hand has gone against her, and she goes on to say a couple of times call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

The question is: “How do we navigate life when it seems like we are in the desert?” What do I do when I am questioning God about why this is happening? Where do I turn for help? I believe in this situation the best thing to do is cry out to God. Say, Lord help me, because we can’t dig ourselves out of the hole we seem to be in. We can cry out to the Lord and ask questions. What are you trying to teach me? Lord what are you trying to show me in the midst of my despair? And most importantly, Lord, where are you?

- Psalm 34:17 says, the Lord hears his people when they call to him for help. He rescues them for all their troubles.
- James 1:2-4 – Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.
- Hebrews 4:16 – Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

We can create a spiritual atmosphere by our words and behavior. When I begin to take my troubles to the Lord, when I begin to seek him in prayer, something begins to happen deep within my soul. It is almost like the Lord lifts me out of the hole as I seek Him. He truly does restore my joy, because my focus is no longer on myself, but on him.

It changes the atmosphere as the Lord shows me that instead of being far away, He was always by my side. I thought the Lord did not hear my cry, but His heart was attentive to my plea. I thought the Lord did not care, but the Lord cared more for me than I could ever imagine. As you begin to dialog with the Lord and He begins to reveal this to you. It will indeed restore your joy and the Lord will give you a testimony. You will say, listen, this is what the Lord did in my life. God is amazing.

Our first thought is: **when I direct my hardships to the Lord, it brings me peace and joy which keep me from becoming bitter and filled with unforgiveness.** When my father died 14 years ago this March I felt like a soldier who had been abandoned on the field of battle. My father who was always by my side was gone; he had gone to be with the Lord. Now what? I spent the next 3-4 months just listening to the Psalms each day as my devotion. Over time this wound of separation was healed and I moved on. It was like crawling up into the lap of your father and just listen to him and being love. The Lord restored my joy.

As we move on with our story, our other major character in our story was Ruth. What do we learn about her? What kind of atmosphere does she bring into the room? It says that she was kind to her husband. When Naomi tells her to return, she stays with Naomi. She goes on to say, “Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.” I believe Ruth was a great encourager. When Ruth walked in the room, encouragement walked in with her. She encouraged Naomi during difficult times and on their journey.

It says in Ecc. 4:9-12 “<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: <sup>10</sup>If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! <sup>11</sup>Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup>Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Our next thought is: **encouraging words make a difference and changes the atmosphere.**

Have you ever known someone who believed in you? This was someone who frequently spoke words of encouragement and praise. This was the kind of person who made you feel you could do it, whatever “it” was. That is the kind of person God wants us to be. Paul gave a good guideline when he wrote that everything we say should build up the one who is listening.

Ephesians 4:29 says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Acts 15:32 says, “Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.”

1 Thes. 4:18 says, “We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.”

Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

When the thief on the cross spoke to Jesus he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise.”

Ruth’s encouraging words to Naomi made a difference. She changed the atmosphere because what is in the air makes a difference.

As we come to the last part of our message today I want to go back and look what Naomi said about the Lord. She speaks about the hand of God when she says, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— <sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has gone out against me!”

**The good news is the hand of God is not against us, but for us.** Hands are important. On my daughter’s Becky’s wedding day, I took hold of her hand and passed it over to the minister. His hand for these purposes represented God’s hand. He in turn joined her hand to that of her husband Austin. Symbolically I gave her to God and God gave her to her husband.

God uses hands. Many times, we read of Jesus healing through laying his hands on the sick people, or even just touching them with his hands. At other times, he put His hands on people to bless them. He told his disciples that their

hands would be used to heal the sick. Indeed, people were healed through the laying on of their hands. Other were filled with the Spirit when the disciples laid their hands on them. “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” Psalm 145:16. God’s hand is open and generous.

God writes the name of every believer in the Lamb’s book of life with his hand. “And I saw the dead great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. Rev. 20:12

God’s hand is on those who look to him. Ezra the prophet says this as he knew the Lord’s hand was upon him, “Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.” Ezra 7:28. Today you may feel like Naomi so let me encourage and remind you that the Lord’s hand is on you! Think about that.

As we end chapter one of Ruth it says, “So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem in late spring, at the beginning of the harvest.” This was God as He worked in their life for the story doesn’t end there. God would provide food and provision through the harvest season.

The hands of the Lord were pierced for us upon the cross, so our sins could be forgiven. This made it possible for his hands to be extended so we could come to him like the prodigal son coming to his father. The hands of the Lord are upon us even we don’t realize, or He seems far away.

## Story 3 – Jonah – Small Group

Begin with prayer and review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: Two weeks ago, we saw how God broke into Gideon's life and used Gideon to help save the nation of Israel in a miraculous way. This story showed how God, in His love, broke in to help His people. Last week we saw God break into Ruth and Naomi's life to begin to bring good in a difficult time. Today's story is no different. God intrudes in an unwelcome way into Jonah's life, but in doing this, God intrudes on the unbelievers in Nineveh to help them come to Him. God joins us in our weakest and worst moments and visits us as the Divine Intruder.

Icebreaker: Tell about a time when you had to do something you really didn't want to do.

Context: Two weeks ago, the story of Gideon took place when the judges ruled over the nation of Israel. Ruth and Naomi also lived during the time of the judges. After the judges, came 3 different kings, (Saul, David, and Solomon). Then the nation of Israel was split into 2 parts, northern and southern, with kings governing each. Jonah was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom; but in this story, Jonah is asked to go to a nation which is Israel's enemy. God called Jonah to go to a pagan, Gentile city and call them to repentance. Ancient historians say that Nineveh was the largest city in the world at that time.

### **A Story from the Word of God – Jonah 1-4 :**

One day, God told Jonah, a prophet and messenger of God, to go to the great city of Nineveh and tell the people to stop sinning and obey God. Jonah didn't like those people and didn't want to go. So, he ran away, in the opposite direction, and bought a ticket for a ship going to Tarshish. Jonah hoped that God would forget and ask someone else to go.

While on the ship, a big storm broke loose. Everyone on board thought they were going to die. To lighten the load, the passengers started throwing cargo overboard, but nothing helped. The captain found Jonah sleeping through the storm and woke him up. He wanted Jonah to pray to his God for help. Jonah was in no praying mood; he knew that because of his disobedience, God had sent the storm.

Up on the deck, the sailors decided to roll dice to see who was to blame for this storm. In the end, the lots all fell to Jonah. Jonah then told the sailors that he was running away from God. "Just throw me into the sea!" Jonah told them. "If you do, the sea will become calm." The sailors did not want to throw him overboard. They tried to save the ship, but nothing worked.

In the end, they did throw Jonah overboard. As soon as Jonah fell into the sea, the storm stopped, and everything was peaceful. The sailors knew that Jonah's God was the true God, and they started worshiping Him.

As Jonah sank deeper into the dark water, a big fish appeared and swallowed him. Jonah was so afraid and thought he was going to die; but God had other plans. This was not the end of Jonah. Jonah found himself in the dark, squishy, stinky belly of this big fish. Jonah had time to think, pray, and get things right with God.

After three days, the fish vomited Jonah out onto the beach, and then swam away. There he was, stinky, alone, and washed up on a faraway beach. But Jonah knew this time that he had to obey God by going to Nineveh and telling them God's message.

He told the people of Nineveh about God's message. "Repent!" he said. "Repent, or you'll all die!" Jonah was hoping that they would not repent, and that they would all die. He still did not like these Ninevites.

To Jonah's surprise, the people of Nineveh listened to God's message and became very sad over their wicked sin. For days, they cried and prayed, asking God to have mercy on them. God listened to their prayers and forgave them. When Jonah saw that God was not going to punish the Ninevites, he became angry and he complained to God. "You send me all this way and then you don't even punish these wicked people." Jonah left the city and went out and sat on a hill that overlooked Nineveh. Jonah still hoped to see God destroy it. As he waited, God caused a plant to grow, and it gave Jonah a bit of shade.

The next day, God caused a worm to destroy the plant shading Jonah. Without the plant, Jonah was unprotected from the sun, which made him even more mad and grumpy. Jonah lost his temper and said to God, "It is better for me to die than to live!" Then God spoke to Jonah and said, "Is it right for you to be

angry for the plant? You mourn for a plant that you did nothing to make grow because it provided you with a bit of comfort. Should I not pity an entire city of people who don't know right from wrong?" God wanted to teach Jonah that when people stopped sinning and obeyed Him, He would forgive, protect, and bless them. (Story shortened from whole book of Jonah)

A Story from the Word of God

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

Head Questions: (get the facts straight)

Who was Jonah?

What did God want him to do?

What was Jonah's reaction to God's request?

How did God help him change his mind?

What did Jonah finally do?

How did the people of Nineveh react?

How did Jonah feel about Nineveh repenting?

How did God feel about Jonah's reaction to Nineveh's repentance?

Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

How do you think Jonah felt when God asked him to go to Nineveh?

How would you feel if God asked you to witness to someone you considered your enemy?

Contrast how the sailors wanted to be obedient to God versus Jonah.

What kind of emotions might Jonah have felt as he was going overboard? In the fish?

Tell about a time where God put you in a "belly of the fish" situation.

What do you think motivated Jonah to go preach to the Ninevites?

Do you think Jonah sincerely wanted to see the Ninevites saved? How does this speak to half-hearted servants?

What was Jonah's emotional state when Nineveh repented? Was this justifiable?

What would you feel like if someone who had done something terrible to your family got saved instead of punished?

What does this story tell us about God's desire to save all people?

How do you see God as the divine intruder in this story?

What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

Hands Questions: (Application)

What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?

What changes will you have to make to do that application?

How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?

What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 3 – Jonah – Sermon

**Jonah and The Divine Intruder - Text: Jonah 1:1-17, 2:1-12, 2:10, and 3:1-10**

**Theme: *God's Mercy Extends Beyond What We Can Imagine* by Tom Graves**

Context: To set the story of Jonah in context, it takes place when Israel is divided into separate nations. Jonah is a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. To the north of Israel is the empire of Assyria, now modern-day Iraq, an aggressive and destructive power in the ancient Near East. The Assyrians were cruel people and greatly disliked by their neighbors including Israel. The Lord tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the city of Israel's great enemy Assyria, to tell its people they are going to be destroyed. Of all the places God, could have sent Jonah, Nineveh may have been the hardest place for Jonah to go. To Jonah, the danger is not simply that Nineveh is an evil, wicked city but an enemy of Israel.

### **A story from God's word.**

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup> "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." <sup>3</sup> But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

<sup>4</sup> Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. <sup>6</sup> The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

<sup>7</sup> Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

<sup>8</sup> So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

<sup>9</sup> He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”

<sup>10</sup> This terrified them, and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

<sup>11</sup> The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So, they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

<sup>12</sup> “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

<sup>13</sup> Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. <sup>14</sup> Then they cried to the Lord, “O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.” <sup>15</sup> Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. <sup>16</sup> At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. <sup>17</sup> But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. <sup>2</sup> He said: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. <sup>10</sup> And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: <sup>2</sup> “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

<sup>3</sup> Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. <sup>4</sup> On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” <sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup> When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup> Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup> But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call

urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (NIV) A story from God’s word.

Our theme for today is “**God’s Mercy Extends Beyond What We Can Imagine.**” As we think of all that is going on in the book of Jonah and in today’s world, we see the desperate need for God’s mercy and intervention. Over and over in the Bible we see the Lord as a God of mercy and grace. The Lord is also a righteous judge, but only when his mercy and grace is refused. Understanding mercy is often difficult because in our culture we often hear “I’ll get them for that” or “I hope they get what they deserve.”

God, however, is merciful to even the worst offenders, sinners, and law-breakers. This means that even though He knows of our guilt, He doesn’t always issue the punishment deserved. Romans 3:23-24 says “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Simply, we are all sinners and do not meet the standards of righteousness that God intends us to have. But, through His mercy and grace He provided a way for our sins to be forgiven through our acceptance of Christ Jesus as our Savior—even though we don’t deserve it. The God of mercy calls for the following in Micah 6:8: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” These are words to all of mankind.

When we begin to look at our story today through God’s eyes of mercy, it begins to have greater clarity and gives us greater insight into the heart of God. We often just focus on Jonah, but deeper story is about God’s mercy. In our first part of our story, the Lord calls Jonah to go the great city of Nineveh to preach against it because it is so wicked. God is going to extend his mercy to Nineveh by sending Jonah to preach a message of repentance. But as we can see from our story when Jonah receives the call from God, instead of going to Nineveh he runs from God. Jonah is a prophet of God, he knows God, he knows the power of God, and

he also knows about God's mercy. Even with this, he decides to disobey God and heads for Tarshish, which is in modern day Spain.

As our story continues, the Lord is not done with Jonah and he sends a great storm upon the waters and the boat. He does this to get Jonah's attention, to wake him up. Interesting enough, the captain of the ship must wake Jonah up because he is in a deep sleep in the middle of this great storm. Without the Lord's intervention in our life we go in to a spiritual sleep not aware of the danger we are in. In a real sense we are blinded by satan and our own sin. **In God's mercy, He often uses storms in our life caused by our own sin to wake us up, to get us back on track with His plan for our life.** Take time to think about the storms in your life caused by your own sin and how the Lord used those storms to get you back on track with his plan for your life.

I want to take a few minutes to examine the storm in our story because it is very important. In this story, we know the storm came from God because he was intervening in the life of Jonah, but Jonah's sin of running from God just did not affect him. Jonah's actions affected those that were on the ship with him. **When we are disobedient to God's will it not only affects you, but others.**

Jonah is thrown overboard by the crew, but he doesn't drown. Instead, in God's mercy, He sends a great fish to swallow Jonah. Just at the right time, this giant fish becomes a living example of God's mercy. Jonah was headed for certain death, but in God's mercy He rescued him. You and I were headed for certain death, but in God's mercy he rescued us, he called us to faith and set us on a new path. That, my friends, is something to be thankful for, to praise God for his mercy toward us.

Sometimes when we have blown it, we may think the Lord will not take us back. But when we repent and turn to Him, he is always there with his arms outstretched calling us to himself. It says in chapter 2:1-2, "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.<sup>2</sup> He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.<sup>10</sup> And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." **Because of God's mercy He won't stop pursuing you even when you have been disobedient.**

The Bible says, “the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost.” The “Son of Man” is Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was born of a virgin, whom God sent to save us from ourselves, our sin, and the punishment of sin. The Bible calls Jesus the good shepherd who cares for his sheep. When even one sheep wanders away from the flock, the Good Shepherd goes after it with all his ability. He doesn’t stop until he brings the wandering lamb back to the flock safe and sound. That is what God does when he pursues you.

As we look at the last part of our story today, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time and he obeys and goes to Nineveh with the message, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned. Something miraculous began to happen...the people of Nineveh repented including the King and his nobles.” It says in 3:10, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” As chapter three ends there is a great victory over darkness when the people of Nineveh believe God and repent of their sin. **Repentance brings the fruit of God’s mercy.**

Take time to look around you to see the people the Lord has brought to worship today because they too, are the fruit of God’s mercy. Amen.

## Story 4 – The Prodigal – Small Group

Begin with prayer and review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: As we have seen in the past few weeks, our Creator God has the right to intrude in our lives. He does this, however, not because He is mean but because He loves us and wants the best for us. God broke into Gideon's life and used him to save the nation from its enemies. God broke into Naomi's life with Ruth, He sent Jonah to enemy land in order to bring salvation to them. God, Himself, broke into our earthly realm in the form of Jesus Christ. Today's story is one that Jesus told to demonstrate the character of God.

Icebreaker: Did you ever run away from home? Share that experience.

Context: Jesus tells this parable to answer the Pharisees' and scribes' question to why he eats with sinners and tax collectors. Pharisees and scribes are religious leaders that wanted to please God and so they added extra laws to the God's laws in their attempt not to sin. They became very focused on following the rules and forgot about having a right attitude or right heart. They thought that being with people that had sinned would make them unclean or contaminate them. They couldn't understand why Jesus, if He really was a rabbi or teacher, would eat with people that the Pharisees found disgusting.

While we often call this parable the Prodigal Son, it is really a story about a father and two sons. As you listen, see if you can describe each son and how the father reacts to each of them.

### **A Story from the Word of God, Luke 15:11-32,**

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, 'Give me now the part of your property that I am supposed to receive someday.' So the father divided his wealth between his two sons.

<sup>13</sup> "A few days later the younger son gathered up all that he had and left. He traveled far away to another country, and there he wasted his money living like a fool. <sup>14</sup> After he spent everything he had, there was a terrible famine throughout the country. He was hungry and needed money. <sup>15</sup> So he went and got a job with one of the people who lived there. The man sent him into the fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He was

so hungry that he wanted to eat the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “The son realized that he had been very foolish. He thought, ‘All my father’s hired workers have plenty of food. But here I am, almost dead because I have nothing to eat. <sup>18</sup> I will leave and go to my father. I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But let me be like one of your hired workers.’ <sup>20</sup> So he left and went to his father.

“While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him coming and felt sorry for him. So he ran to him and hugged and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> The son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Hurry! Bring the best clothes and put them on him. Also, put a ring on his finger and good sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring our best calf and kill it so that we can celebrate with plenty to eat. <sup>24</sup> My son was dead, but now he is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!’ So, they began to have a party.

<sup>25</sup> “The older son had been out in the field. When he came near the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called to one of the servant boys and asked, ‘What does all this mean?’ <sup>27</sup> The boy said, ‘Your brother has come back, and your father killed the best calf to eat. He is happy because he has his son back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older son was angry and would not go in to the party. So, his father went out and begged him to come in. <sup>29</sup> But he said to his father, ‘Look, for all these years I have worked like a slave for you. I have always done what you told me to do, and you never gave me even a young goat for a party with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But then this son of yours comes home after wasting your money on prostitutes, and you kill the best calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “His father said to him, ‘Oh, my son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But this was a day to be happy and celebrate. Your brother was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now he is found.’” (ERV)

## A Story from the Word of God

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

### Head Questions: (get the facts straight)

Who are the characters of our story?

Describe each one.

What does the younger son ask for?

Where does the younger son go?

What happens there?

Why does the son return?

What is the father's reaction? The older brother's reaction?

### Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

What do you think the younger son's request implied about his character?

How does the father's reaction to the request surprise you?

What does the father's agreement to the request tell you about his character?

Explain why you think the younger son's plans failed in the far away land.

Share a time when something similar happened to you.

How does the younger son feel at this point?

What does the way the father reacts tell you about his attitude toward the son?

What would be your attitude if your child did something like the younger son to you?

What does the reaction of the older brother tell you about his attitude toward his brother?

What does the reaction of the older brother tell you about his attitude toward his father?

If you had been the older brother how would you have felt?

Which son do you think was the most lost? Explain.

If you had been a character in the story who would you be and why?

How do you see God as the divine intruder in this story?

What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

### Hands Questions: (Application)

What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?

What changes will you have to make to do that application?

How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?  
What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 4 – The Prodigal – Sermon

**The Prodigal and The Divine Intruder - Text: Luke 15:11-32**

**Theme: *Who is the Divine Intruder?* By Paula Graves**

We have been considering how our God is a Divine Intruder for the past three Sundays and we continue that study today with a parable that Jesus told toward the end of His ministry. My sermon title is “*Who is the Divine Intruder?*” God, who is our creator, has the right to break into our lives. We have seen that when He does break in, it does not benefit only the individual whose life is intruded upon but brings blessings to those around this individual.

As we begin, it will be helpful to learn a bit about society at the time. At the end of Jesus’ ministry, we see that the people loved His teaching because Jesus did not teach like the Scribes and Pharisees. These same scribes and Pharisees, however, did not think much of Jesus’ teaching. Before we put a black hat on these religious leaders, let’s exam who they really were.

The Pharisees were a sub-group of Jews who realized that God’s people had been exiled because they failed to follow God’s law. They didn’t want this to happen again, so they developed hundreds of more laws that were even more strict than God’s law. Their thinking was that if people obeyed these extra laws, there was no way that they would break God’s laws and thus would never be sent into exile again. They had good intentions but unfortunately, their strategy turned their focus away from God and onto the law. Scribes were our equivalent of lawyers, so they obviously focused on the details of the law.

The culture Jesus lived in was also a shame and honor culture. Honor refers to an individual’s worth as a person and shame refers to an individual’s reputation by others. It was important that everyone know and conform to the standards of the group. If one followed the cultural rules, one would be recognized with honor. But, if an individual did not follow these cultural rules, they would be branded as a fool and a sinner to their shame. They would also be social outcasts.

These facts can help us understand our text. At the beginning of Ch 15, the scribes and Pharisees are complaining that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Remember, these religious leaders are the elite of society and their status

comes from following the rules. Those that they consider “sinners” didn’t follow their rules and were ostracized by them. They cannot understand how Jesus can be a prophet and eat with people the leaders would never associate with.

Jesus does not directly answer their complaint but tells three parables of lost things. First is the lost sheep and second the lost coin. These items were common in society and valued so that when the lost is found, it is celebrated. The third parable, our text, expands on the first two. Through this parable, Jesus shows how God’s attitude toward those who repent differs from the Pharisee’s attitude.

### **A Story from the Word of God:**

<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, ‘Give me now the part of your property that I am supposed to receive someday.’ So the father divided his wealth between his two sons.

<sup>13</sup> “A few days later the younger son gathered up all that he had and left. He traveled far away to another country, and there he wasted his money living like a fool. <sup>14</sup> After he spent everything he had, there was a terrible famine throughout the country. He was hungry and needed money. <sup>15</sup> So he went and got a job with one of the people who lived there. The man sent him into the fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He was so hungry that he wanted to eat the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “The son realized that he had been very foolish. He thought, ‘All my father’s hired workers have plenty of food. But here I am, almost dead because I have nothing to eat. <sup>18</sup> I will leave and go to my father. I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But let me be like one of your hired workers.’ <sup>20</sup> So he left and went to his father.

“While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him coming and felt sorry for him. So he ran to him and hugged and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> The son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Hurry! Bring the best clothes and put them on him. Also, put a ring on his finger and good sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And

bring our best calf and kill it so that we can celebrate with plenty to eat. <sup>24</sup> My son was dead, but now he is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!’ So, they began to have a party.

<sup>25</sup> “The older son had been out in the field. When he came near the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called to one of the servant boys and asked, ‘What does all this mean?’ <sup>27</sup> The boy said, ‘Your brother has come back, and your father killed the best calf to eat. He is happy because he has his son back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older son was angry and would not go in to the party. So his father went out and begged him to come in. <sup>29</sup> But he said to his father, ‘Look, for all these years I have worked like a slave for you. I have always done what you told me to do, and you never gave me even a young goat for a party with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But then this son of yours comes home after wasting your money on prostitutes, and you kill the best calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “His father said to him, ‘Oh, my son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But this was a day to be happy and celebrate. Your brother was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now he is found.’” (ERV)

A story from the word of God.

This parable is a story in two acts and I think it will be helpful to look at each act.

### **Act 1: Rebellion**

When the younger son asks for his inheritance, he is basically telling his father that he wished he were dead. This alone was a shameful deed. In this case, according to the law in Deuteronomy, the older son would receive two-thirds of the estate and the younger, one-third. Surprisingly, the father gives up his source of income to his sons without complaint even though society would think less of him. The younger son appears to have been able to convert his inheritance to cash and leaves as soon as possible.

This son travels to what is inferred to be a Gentile land. This would be a place where he was free from the Jewish laws so that he could live as he pleased. He lived the high life and appeared to have many friends until the money ran out. Then he was all alone and no one would give him anything. He survived by

feeding pigs which would have a disgraceful job for a Jewish boy. He was so hungry that he even considered eating the pig's food which would be considered by the Jews as the lowest, most degrading type of food to eat.

He finally came to himself. Hunger and the shame of his job gave him cause to see the reality of his situation. He was sitting among pigs that were better fed than he. He realizes that his father's servants are better off than he and humbles himself to return home. The son knows that he had no moral right to be identified as a son and practices a confession in hopes that he can be a servant.

Here the story turns to focus on the father, who appears to have been waiting for the son. In the culture of the day, it was shameful for a grown man to run. In this case, the father sets aside the shame to meet his son as he comes home. Compassion of the father for the son would break all Middle Eastern protocol. No father should accept a rebellious son in this way. In fact, it would have been lawful to kill the son for what he had done. The son has prepared a confession, but the father does not even let him finish. He interrupts the son and quickly acts to show others that he is accepting the boy back as a son by placing a robe, sandals and ring on him.

The younger son would be considered a sinner by the Jewish culture of the time. A Jewish man who would abandon his family for a decadent lifestyle and then feed pigs would be considered extremely sinful. Someone who acted this way would bring shame on the family and be shunned by society. The father's welcome of the repentant son would have shocked the Pharisees because it was counter-cultural.

The father not only ran to the son with robe and sandals but killed the fattened calf in celebration. The fattened calf was killed to provide a celebration. Meat was not a daily part of meals and was only eaten at special times of celebration. The killing of the fatted calf shows the lavish reception the father was giving the son. The son demonstrates a type of resurrection as the dead was brought to life again. Celebrating that the lost when found is also seen in the previous two parables.

The younger son demonstrates how many of us have treated God our Father at one time or another. We don't want to follow His rules and we want to go our own way and do our own thing. This sounds like a great plan until we experience

the consequences of our actions. We may not end up with physical pigs, but we still may be hungry in the pig pen of life.

**The amazing thing is that when we humble ourselves, repent and return to our Father, He receives us back.** Even though we really deserve death, He gives life and gives it abundantly. Jesus had prepared His original listeners with the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin. At the end of the lost sheep parable, He states, “there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!” Jesus ends the lost coin story with, “there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.” Thus, we can see that God receives repentant sinners back with celebration. What a comfort this is to us, who sin. We can be assured that God will receive us back when we repent.

But the parable doesn’t end here. There is still another act...

## **Act 2: Lost in a different way**

The first act shows how a rebellious son who repents is received back with celebration. The father received the younger son with compassion, but the older brother reacts with anger. The father has asked the older son to come in and celebrate. The older son’s refusal to enter the celebration would violate the command to honor his father and would publicly shame the father. The action of the older son now parallels, although in a more culturally acceptable way, the action of the younger son in act one of the parable.

Just as the father went out to the younger son in act one, now the father goes out to the older son. The older son complains that he has been a slave. He sees his relationship with his father as slavish bondage and not a loving relationship. In his mind, his years of service were valuable and worthy of celebration and complains that the Father hasn’t even given him a measly goat for a party. The Father reminds the son that everything he has is the son’s. This is true because the inheritance has already been given. The older son already owns all the cattle and the goats, and they are his to eat anytime.

The older son goes onto contrast his brothers sinful action against his own self-righteous claims. The father responds to the older son’s outburst by beginning his reply with the word “son.” The Greek word here is *teknon* which refers to a

mutual loving relationship. This father desires a close loving relationship with the son, but the older son appears to think of the relationship as duty. In the older son's eyes, the younger son has not done his duty so does not deserve a relationship. Still the father invites the older son to come celebrate the younger's return because "For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

The ending of this second act is open. We don't know if the older son goes into the celebration or not. The Pharisees had reduced their relationship with God to duty and could not understand why God would accept anyone who had not done their duty. **Do we see following Christ as a duty? Does God accept us only if we do our duty?**

Kline Snodgrass, a NT scholar, has defined a parable as a form of communication that "deceives the hearer into the truth." It would be at this point that the Pharisee could identify themselves in the parable. They had complained that Jesus ate with sinners and asked Him why He would do that. Jesus answers their question at this point.

He is eating with those the Pharisees call sinners because they have repented and desire a loving relationship with Him. As a result, they have been transferred from death to life and this is cause for celebration. The Pharisees' sense of duty to the law has blinded them to what God desired for relationship with them. The Pharisees can celebrate a lost sheep or a lost coin, but they don't understand that a lost soul than has been found is worth much more.

### **Character of Divine Intruder**

This parable reveals the character of our Divine Intruder. The father allows the younger son to rebel. God gives us free will; He has not made us robots. We can make the choice not to follow God.

The father seems to absorb the shame that the two sons generate. We have a savior in Jesus Christ who also absorbs our shame. Jesus died a shameful death on the cross to pay the price for our guilt. When we humble ourselves, and come to Him, our burden of sin and shame is left at the cross.

The younger son's plan was to be a servant in his father's house, but his father restored the boy to the place of a son. Jesus also restores us when we fall. The culture of the day would have sought to kill the younger son for his actions, but the father hurries to make sure those around realized that he was accepting him back as son and not servant. Jesus gives us life abundantly as He restores our relationship with Him. In doing that, our relationship with others is often restored.

The older son saw his relationship with his father as slavish duty. For those of us in the church, we may also fall into this rut. We feel that we must do religious rituals just right to endear ourselves to God. We forget that God grants life to us through grace, we can do nothing to deserve it. The father wanted the older son to realize their relationship needed an upgrade. Jesus wants to give you an upgrade in His relationship with you. Just as the father invited the older son to come to the party, Jesus is inviting you to celebrate when others come to faith.

And finally, we have a Divine Intruder that wants to celebrate when the lost are found. I grew up in a church where it was deemed disrespectful to crack a smile. I don't see that attitude in this chapter. There is celebration when the lost sheep is found. There is celebration when the lost coin is found. A lost soul is worth much, much more than either a sheep or a coin and deserves a grand celebration. Jesus has brought us from death to life and we have that life here on earth and eternally with Him. That is a reason for praise and celebration as we worship a God who is the Divine Intruder.

As we conclude, know that God is a divine intruder and wants us to choose to follow him, not out of duty but out of love. When we believe, Jesus absorbs our shame and restores us when we fall. Our faith and the faith of others is something to be celebrated.

## Story 5 – Lazarus – Small Group

Begin in prayer. Review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: By this time, you have seen how God intruded into the lives of Gideon, Ruth and Naomie, Jonah, and the Father with two sons. God breaks into our lives, too, because He loves us. But God, does not always intervene the way we think He should. Mary and Martha thought Jesus would just come and heal their brother, Lazarus. Instead, Jesus has a much bigger plan.

Icebreaker: Tell about a time that God answered a prayer in an unexpected way.

Context: Jesus did not have a home of His own during His ministry. He relied on the hospitality of friends to have a place to sleep and eat. The sisters and brother, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, often had Jesus stay with them in their town of Bethany. They all were good friends.

### **A Story from the Word of God – John 11:1-44**

While Jesus was doing ministry with His disciples, He received a letter from His friends, Mary and Martha, that Lazarus was sick. Jesus didn't leave right away to heal Lazarus, instead, He stayed where He was for two more days. He told His disciples, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up."

The disciples said, "Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!" They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died. So, he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And for your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there, for now you will really believe. Come, let's go see him."

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. Many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

“Yes,” Martha said, “he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God.” Then she went to get Mary. When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave, they assumed she was going to Lazarus’s grave to weep. So, they followed her there. When Mary arrived, and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her and the others weeping He was deeply troubled. “Where have you put him?” he asked them.

They told him, “Lord, come and see.” Then Jesus wept.

But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

Jesus arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. “Roll the stone aside,” Jesus told them.

But Martha, the dead man’s sister, said, “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.”

Jesus responded, “Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?” So, they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.” Then Jesus shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, “Unwrap him and let him go!” (story simplified from ERV)

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

Head Questions: (get the facts straight)

Who are Mary, Martha and Lazarus?  
What happened to Lazarus?  
How long did Jesus wait to go to Lazarus?  
What did Martha say when Jesus came?  
What did Jesus tell her?  
What did Mary have to say to Jesus?  
How did Jesus react to the situation?  
What was the result for Lazarus?

Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

Why do you think Jesus didn't go to Lazarus immediately?  
Why do you think Jesus doesn't always answer our prayers immediately?  
What do the disciples say that shows they aren't thinking the same as Jesus?  
How does that same thing happen to us today?  
What did Martha and Mary expect of Jesus?  
How did Martha react when those expectations weren't met? How did Mary react?  
How do we react with our expectations of Jesus aren't met?  
How do the cynics react to the situation?  
How do cynics continue to react to how Jesus works?  
How do you think Martha felt when Jesus said to roll the stone away?  
How do we react when Jesus commands us to do thing that don't seem to make sense in our human situation?  
How do you think Lazarus felt when Jesus called him back to earth?  
How does God intrude in this story?  
Of the characters, Lazarus, Martha, or Mary, who would you be and why?  
What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

Hands Questions: (Application)

What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?  
What changes will you have to make to do that application?  
How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?  
What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 5 – Lazarus – Sermon

**Lazarus and The Divine Intruder - Text: John 11:1-45**

**Theme: *I Cried for Help* by Tom Graves**

To set our story of Lazarus in context, it takes place near the end of Jesus three years of ministry not long before Holy week. Jesus responds to the cries of help by Mary and Martha the sisters of Lazarus. The name of Lazarus means “God is my help.” This is true for all of us. In John chapter 10 Jesus talks about himself being the gate when he says, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” In our story, we see the cries of Mary and Martha being answered in a way they did not expect, but in a way that glorified Jesus and brought many people to faith. The act of people coming to faith is the greatest miracle of our story.

### **A Story from the Word of God**

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” <sup>4</sup> When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” <sup>5</sup> Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. <sup>7</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

<sup>8</sup> “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?” <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. <sup>10</sup> It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.”

<sup>11</sup> After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” <sup>12</sup> His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” <sup>13</sup> Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

<sup>14</sup> So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, <sup>15</sup> and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

<sup>16</sup> Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup> Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup> “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

<sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” <sup>28</sup> And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.”

<sup>29</sup> When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet entered the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

<sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. <sup>34</sup> “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied. <sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.

<sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. <sup>39</sup> “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

<sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

<sup>43</sup> When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

<sup>45</sup> Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. (NLT)

A story from God’s word.

This is a long story, but I thought we needed to cover the entire story today to better understand the broad picture Jesus is painting for us. As we look at the first part of our story, Lazarus is quite ill, and his sisters send a note to Jesus for him to come quickly to heal their brother. Evidently Lazarus is so ill that the only hope he has is Jesus.

Place yourself in the sandals of Mary and Martha. Your brother is ill, and you have sent a note to Jesus, but you must wait for Jesus to come. They are waiting on God; they are waiting on the Son of man and it will be several days before Jesus comes. While they wait, their brother dies. **The question is what can the Lord teach us while we are waiting?**

Psalm 27:14 says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup>in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

One of the most difficult things in life is trusting in the Lord as we wait. We may be waiting for an answer to prayer for a loved one to come to know the Lord. We may be waiting on the Lord to heal us physically, or emotionally. We may be waiting on the Lord for a job, waiting on the Lord to have a child, and the list goes on.

While Mary and Martha are waiting on the Lord Jesus says, “this sickness will not end in death. No. It is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” How do trials glorify God?

- They develop our Christian character as we learn to be patient, and learn that our strength, courage comes from the Lord.
- They provide opportunities to show how God’s timing expresses his love to us. Many Christians who have faced great difficulties testified later how God’s timing showed them their prayers were answered in perfect timing. But many times, this only happens as they looked back with perspective.
- How has the Lord transformed you as you had to wait on him and what did He teach you during this time?

Our first major thought I want you to think about is: **when we wait on the Lord it cuts away life’s attractions, diversions, and illusions as we focus on God for help.**

As our story continues, Jesus indicates to the disciples that they need to go to Judea to the home of Lazarus. But the disciples remind Jesus that a short while ago the Jews tried to stone Him. Why would He go back and put them all in danger? Jesus answered, “Are there not 12 hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.” John 11:9-10.

What is Jesus saying to us in those verses? Jesus regarded the time of daylight as a time to do ministry. For believers, it is a time of doing ministry, to build the Kingdom of God guided by the Light of Jesus. If we do our work by the Light of Jesus, we will not stumble. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." John 8:12 says, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

In a spiritual sense our congregation has 12 hours of daylight. What will we do with this precious time the Lord has given us? Also, as individuals each of us is given 12 hours of daylight in a spiritual sense. What will we do with it?

The good news is, if we are not using our time wisely, the Lord is calling us today to change, to be transformed. It says in Matthew 16:24, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Am I willing to deny myself for the sake of the Gospel? Will you deny yourself for the sake of the Gospel? You and I can't do this on our own, but the Bible says in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

To summarize this part of our story I think we need to again go back to John 8:12 where Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Waiting on God and walking in the light of Jesus sets the foundation for the most important element of our story, which is about faith in Jesus. Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus is not sleeping but dead and says for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. John 11:14. This same theme of "believe" is again brought up when Martha tells Jesus that if you would have been here my brother would not have died and Jesus responds.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup> "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

The believer will not experience eternal death. Lazarus had been a believer in Jesus; therefore, even though he died he would live. Every believer who has died will yet live, and everyone who is still living and believing will die, but not eternally. Jesus Himself is the resurrection and He is the life. Only through a relationship with Him can we experience this resurrection and this life. John 10:10 says, “<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” NAS says abundantly. Psalm 23:5 says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Life without Jesus is an empty cup, but when we come into a relationship with Jesus, our cup now overflows.

As we turn to the last verse in our text verse 45 it says, “Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.” Many people came to faith as they saw Lazarus being raised from the dead because it glorified the Son. **People coming to faith glorifies God. While Lazarus was raised from the dead physically, many people who observed his resurrection were raised from the dead spiritually which is a greater miracle. God did answer the cries of Mary and Martha in his timing doing even more than they imagined.**

Just like Mary and Martha there are people all over the world crying out to the Lord. They have many needs and cry out, “Help me!” The Lord wants to use Light of Christ to answer the prayers of others. He wants to use those who are walking in the light to bring the good news of Jesus in all its forms to glorify the Son of God.

## Story 6 – Paul & Silas – Small Group

Begin in prayer. Review the small group guidelines.

Introduction: We have seen how God has broken into the lives of Gideon, Ruth, Jonah, the prodigal, and Lazarus. Sometimes God’s intrusion was welcome, other times it was not. But as we have seen, God always intrudes to bring good to His creation. Today’s final story in our series God intrudes in multiple ways and brings joy.

Icebreaker: How do you survive times when you’ve been treated unfairly?

Context: Our story takes place during the time of the early church. Paul, who was miraculously converted to Christianity, changes from persecuting Christians to becoming a missionary. He and his friend Silas have planted a church in the town of Philippi. The church has grown, but with the expanding border of the kingdom of light comes pushback from the kingdom of darkness.

### **A Story from the Word of God – Acts 16:16-40**

Paul and Silas were preaching in the city of Philippi. There was a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future and she made lots of money for her owners. She also harassed Paul and Silas to the point that Paul said to the demon in her, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And instantly it left her.

Her owners were mad because their source of income was now gone. They said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” This started a riot against Paul and Silas. The city officials grabbed Paul and Silas and beat them and put them into prison.

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted to him, “Stop! Don’t kill yourself! We are all here!”

The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

The next morning the city officials realize they had wronged Paul and Silas and apologized to them but still asked them to leave town. Paul and Silas said good bye to the believers there and went on their way. (simplified from the NLT)

Tell the story, rebuild the story, and read the text. Did the story teller leave anything out?

Head Questions: (get the facts straight)

Who are the two preachers?

Where are they preaching?

What was harassing Paul?

How did Paul deal with the problem?

What was the result?

How were Paul & Silas responding to their unfair imprisonment?

How did intervention come for Paul and Silas? For the Jailer?

Heart Questions: (dig deeper)

How would you describe the spiritual battle at the beginning of our story?

Do these types of battles continue today? Why or why not?

How does God use Paul to intrude on the life of the slave girl?

How do you think the slave girls felt after the demon left?

Why do you think her owners were angry after Paul told the demon to leave?

Do you think the slave girl owners really cared if Paul and Silas were Jews or was that just an excuse? Explain.

Paul and Silas were both Roman citizens and it is illegal for a Roman citizen to be beaten. Why do you think they were so unfairly treated?

How could Paul and Silas praise God in the situation they were in?

How can we do the same?

Who would have been listening to Paul and Silas sing? What was the effect of this?

How could an earthquake just break off chains without destroying the building?

Why do you think the jailer was going to kill himself after the earthquake?

How did God intrude into the situation at this point?

If you were a character in the story, who would you be and why?

What does this story tell us about God? Humankind?

Hands Questions: (Application)

What have you learned today and how can you apply that to your life?

What changes will you have to make to do that application?

How is that hard? How can we help you with those changes?

What was our theme for today?

End in prayer.

## Story 6 – Paul & Silas – Sermon

### Paul & Silas and The Divine Intruder – Text Acts 16:16-34

Theme: *Prayer Moves the Heart of God* by Tom Graves

To set our story of Paul and Silas in prison we need to look at the last part of Acts chapter 15: “Paul said to Barnabas, “We should go back to all the towns where we told people the message of the Lord. We should visit the believers to see how they are doing.”

“<sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark with them too. <sup>38</sup> But on their first trip John Mark did not continue with them in the work. He had left them at Pamphylia. So, Paul did not think it was a good idea to take him this time. <sup>39</sup> Paul and Barnabas had a big argument about this. It was so bad that they separated and went different ways. Barnabas sailed to Cyprus and took Mark with him.

<sup>40</sup> Paul chose Silas to go with him. The believers in Antioch put Paul into the Lord’s care and sent him out. <sup>41</sup> Paul and Silas went through the countries of Syria and Cilicia, helping the churches grow stronger.” Acts 15:36-41

Paul and Silas returned to the churches of Galatia or what we now call central Turkey. They had planned to take the Gospel to western Turkey but were prevented by the Holy Spirit. They then turned their sights to northern Turkey but again were stopped by the Spirit of Jesus. Then Paul had a vision. In it, a man from Macedonia came to Paul. The man stood there and begged, “Come across to Macedonia and help us.” <sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we immediately prepared to leave for Macedonia. We understood that God had called us to tell the Good News to those people.” Acts 16:9-10.

Paul and Silas immediately leave for northern Greece, or Macedonia. The first town they come to is Philippi. There is no synagogue there, but they join a group of women who meet for prayer. “<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath day we went out the city gate to the river. There we thought we might find a special place for prayer. Some women had gathered there, so we sat down and talked with them. <sup>14</sup> There was a woman there named Lydia from the city of Thyatira. Her job was selling purple cloth. She was a worshiper of the true God. Lydia was listening to Paul, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. <sup>15</sup> She and all the people living in her

house were baptized. Then she invited us into her home. She said, “If you think I am a true believer in the Lord Jesus, come stay in my house.” She persuaded us to stay with her.” Acts 16:13-15 Luke says that they went for prayer, but perhaps also the riverside became a regular meeting place for all who wished to hear the apostles preach.

### **A Story from the Word of God:**

<sup>16</sup> One day we were going to the place for prayer, and a servant girl met us. She had a spirit in her that gave her the power to tell what would happen in the future. By doing this she earned a lot of money for the men who owned her. <sup>17</sup> She started following Paul and the rest of us around. She kept shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God! They are telling you how you can be saved!” <sup>18</sup> She continued doing this for many days. This bothered Paul, so he turned and said to the spirit, “By the power of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!” Immediately, the spirit came out.

<sup>19</sup> When the men who owned the servant girl saw this, they realized that they could no longer use her to make money. So, they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them to the public square to meet with the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought Paul and Silas before the Roman officials and said, “These men are Jews, and they are making trouble in our city.” <sup>21</sup> They are telling people to do things that are not right for us as Romans to do.”

<sup>22</sup> The whole crowd turned against Paul and Silas. The officials tore the clothes off both men and ordered that they be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> They were beaten severely and thrown into jail. The officials told the jailer, “Guard them very carefully!” <sup>24</sup> When the jailer heard this special order, he put Paul and Silas far inside the jail and bound their feet between large blocks of wood.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing songs to God. The other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was an earthquake so strong that it shook the foundation of the jail. All the doors of the jail opened, and the chains on all the prisoners fell off. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up and saw that the jail doors were open. He thought that the prisoners had already escaped, so he got his sword and was ready to kill himself. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, “Don’t hurt yourself! We are all here!”

<sup>29</sup> The jailer told someone to bring a light. Then he ran inside and, shaking with fear, fell down in front of Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, “Men, what must I do to be saved?”

<sup>31</sup> They said to him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and all who live in your house.” <sup>32</sup> So Paul and Silas told the message of the Lord to the jailer and all the people who lived in his house. <sup>33</sup> It was late at night, but the jailer took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. Then the jailer and all his people were baptized. <sup>34</sup> After this the jailer took Paul and Silas home and gave them some food. All the people were very happy because they now believed in God. (ERV)

#### A Story from the Word of God

I want to go back to the context of our story because it gives us insight into how the Lord works. The spirit of Jesus does not let Paul and Silas travel to Bithynia which is northern Turkey to minister, why? It says in Proverbs 20:24, “A man’s steps are directed by the Lord.” How then can anyone understand his own way? We indeed have free will. However, when we follow the leading of the Lord, He indeed will direct our steps. It is only in hindsight that we see how wonderful the Lord’s plan is. In our story, God intervenes in the life of Paul and Silas redirecting their path from Turkey to Macedonia. He does that by giving Paul a vision. There was a man from Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Soon Paul and Silas found themselves traveling to Macedonia and taking a boat ride to get there. It is not an easy journey, but they persevere until they arrive at the community of Philippi, a Roman colony and leading city.

Let’s go back and camp on the prayers of the man in Macedonia. When you are praying according to God's will, your prayer is unstoppable. And how do we know what God's will is? Jesus made this promise: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

We gravitate immediately toward the latter part of that verse:” Ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” We love that, but we tend to forget about the first part of this verse: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you.” If we are walking in fellowship with God and studying the Word of God, then we will start

praying according to the will of God. And then we will start seeing our prayers answered.

First John 5:14–15 says, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him."

Why is the man in Macedonia is crying for help? He is concerned about souls. He can't do it on his own and God puts it on his heart to cry out for help. He is praying according to God's will because the Lord allows Paul to see this vision. Matthew 9:35-38 says, "<sup>35</sup> Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

### **Our first thought is: prayer moves the heart of God.**

Paul and Silas have been redirected to Macedonia and are now in the community of Philippi. There they go outside the city gate to the river where they expected to find a place of prayer. It is there they meet a woman named Lydia. She is a dealer of purple cloth who was a worshiper of the Lord. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message and her whole household was baptized. It is interesting that before this happened, Paul and Silas were looking to pray.

From our text, it appears that Paul and Silas are going back to this same place of prayer when they met a slave girl. Now this girl had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She did not benefit financially from this, but she did make her owners a great deal of money. For several days she was shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for several days until Paul became so troubled he said, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

Why did a demon announce the truth about Paul, and why did this annoy Paul.? If Paul accepted the demon's words, he would appear to be linking the gospel with demon related activities. Not only this, but the owners were making

illicit profit. Such association would damage the message of the Gospel. Because of this, her owner's hope of making money was gone and they drug Paul and Silas into the market place to face the Magistrates. The owners used the excuse that Paul and Silas were Jews. And they made a claim that they were throwing the town into an uproar and advocating customs that were unlawful for Romans to accept or practice. The officials then had them stripped and flogged and thrown into prison.

What is the Lord showing us in this part of the story? Paul and Silas are following the will of God and now they are beaten and put in jail. **What the Lord is showing us? There will be a battle for the harvest field and we need to use spiritual weapons to be victorious.** Ephesians 6 says, “<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>14</sup> Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

Remember Paul and Silas have been beaten severely and about midnight they are in the inner cell with their feet in stocks. What are they doing? Praising God! They are fighting a battle, but not with a sword and a shield. They are praying and praising God. Not only is God listening but the other prisoners are also listening. The word “listen” in the original language means they are listening intently. When Paul and Silas came into the prison they changed the atmosphere. They brought the love of Jesus, they brought praise, they brought prayer and they brought joy into a very dark place.

What happened? The Lord send an earthquake and it shook the prison to its foundation, the doors flew open, and their chains came loose and yet no one left the prison. When the jailer was about to kill himself with his sword, Paul speaks up and says, “don't harm yourself we are all here.” Immediately the jailer runs in and

falls at the feet of Paul and Silas trembling and says, “What must I do to be saved?” They replied believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved you and your entire house hold. After they spend some time teaching about the Lord to him and his household, he and his family are baptized. Then we see the fruits of the spirit. The jailer places a meal before them and washes their wounds. The jailer is filled with joy because he has come to believe in God, he and his entire household.

As we close, I want us to meditate on this: When we encounter the living God and become a believer, it transforms us from the inside out. This transformation is life changing and we begin to work in God’s harvest field. This change is not only for this life but is an eternal transformation.

# Final Things

## Contacts:

We hope you will find Biblical storytelling as helpful as we have found it to be. We urge you to find your own style and to adapt it to your setting. We use storytelling in every part of our ministry. We hope to have more storying material available in future eBooks. If you would like to find out more about Light of Christ or would like to contact us, you may visit any of our webpages:

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## Bios:

Tom Graves has been a pastor since 1999. He has served congregations in Wisconsin, Washington, and is the founding pastor of Light of Christ Church. He worked in the private sector for 12 years after college before the Lord called him into ministry.

He is a graduate of University of Wisconsin-Platteville and Concordia Theological Seminary. He has a heart for missions and has been on mission trips in different places in the world. He is married to Paula and they have three grown children.



Paula Graves' first taste of ministry was as a pastor's wife, where she assisted Tom in youth and music ministry. As they planted Light of Christ Church, she felt the need to be better trained and returned to school. She graduated from The Master's Institute in the Twin Cities with her M.Div. in 2017. Paula is excited to begin her new journey in ministry that involves both traditional ministry and new on-line and digital ministry.

She grew up on a farm in Iowa and graduated from the University of Northern Iowa with a degree in Medical Technology. She worked in clinical laboratories for over twenty years prior to being called as a pastor. She also enjoys her role as wife, mother, and soon to be grandmother.

