

Guidelines

These Men's Bible Study messages were written and delivered by Pastor Brad Tuggle at the weekly men's study at Oak Hills Church, called The Next Level.

The handouts for the participants to take notes on and complete the fill-ins are included at the beginning of each message. The fill-in answers are indicated within the transcript of the message as bold underlined text.

The content of these messages is geared towards men's issues of leadership, character, family management, balance, etc, but in reality, the themes transcend purely men's issues and could apply across the board to all members of a church.



Chapter 1: Sin Changes Everything

Of all the things that sin ruins, what is the worst casualty? _____

- With _____
- With _____
- With _____

Remember: Every _____.

“Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, of who you are, into something a little different from what it was before. With all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a man that is in harmony with God, and with others, or else into one that is in a state of war with God, and with others.

To be the one kind of creature is joy and peace; to be the other means madness, rage and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

“People often rationalize their actions by using the old phrase, ‘The end justifies the means.’ I’ll do whatever I need to right now, and then later I’ll do the right thing. The problem is that usually by the end, you’ve become the means.”

—Anna Quindlen

The good news: God’s next steps:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

"From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Genesis 3:15

"How could a good God allow this evil to take place?"

We must learn to "_____ the _____."

Today's Equipping Point

Be the _____

The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'"

They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.

Isaiah 62:11-12

Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost..."

Ezekiel 34:2,4

Discussion Questions

1. What one thing from your past was spoiled/ruined far before its time?
2. If you could go back in time, what one relationship marred by sin would you first restore?
3. Who will you pursue this week, and exactly how will you do it?

Teaching Script

As a kid, what was your dream? Your idea of perfection, your ideal? For some, a peaceful house without shouting. For others, perfection was the centerfolds lining his wall. For another friend, it was his sandbox, building a city with his Tonka trucks and gear. NOBODY could mess with his sandbox.

Story of model car:

- As a kid, have a dream of perfection? Mine was a Corvette. Long way from driving, but that never stopped me from lusting and drooling.
- Friend's hobby, watched him as he meticulously built
- His model looked awesome, picture on box was awesome, I was inspired, bought.
- Started assembling, very careful. Had watched friend, meticulous.
- Also knew had to be done in stages, couldn't rush it.
- The components were perfectly formed—that signature curve of the Corvette hood, the decals, the lacquer paint...the setup was perfect.

The story of creation was much the same:

- God had in his mind a picture, a dream of what He wanted: a creation to be in fellowship with Him.
- The model was perfect—Eden was the ideal setting, environment suited for God's creation.
- God took His time, and didn't rush anything. All the foundations of earth, sky, water, sun, moon, and vegetation were set in place before man arrived.
- He created in stages, each day producing a perfect design.
- All the components were in place—Adam named all the creatures, he and Eve were naked and did not know the word shame.

Reading the first two chapters of Genesis feels something akin to crossing a threshold into another world. God is tending His garden and all is well. God's masterwork is beautiful, believable, and unfolding all according to His plan. The truth, beauty and goodness of creation were higher than our greatest fantasy, other-worldly, like a castle in the air. A dream of perfection that even outclassed my Corvette.

Speaking of my Corvette, even though it was my first foray into model cars, I thought it was going pretty well. I had completed the first phase and gluing all the chassis components in place, and it said to wait 24 hours for the glue to dry before going to the next step. BUT, being more than a little impatient, I thought overnight was too long to wait...and so I deviated from the instructions, which specifically said to wait 24 hours for the glue to dry, and took my flexible desk lamp, put a 100-watt bulb in it, and placed it directly above the plastic chassis frame, and went out to play.

When I came in an hour later, what I returned to did not resemble a Corvette. After baking under my desk lamp for an hour, what I returned to was a melted, bubbling pool of liquid plastic. My perfect model had disintegrated. In fact it was so bad, it was so hot I couldn't touch it...I had to scrape it off with one of my mom's metal spatulas. There was no way that puddle of plastic would ever again possess the beautiful curved lines of a

1969 Corvette Stingray—it was forever ruined. And what's more, it left a permanent mark right in the middle of my desk—an eternal reminder of the cost of my impatience, of the price of deviating from the instructions.

And so my perfect design was:

- Deformed beyond repair
- Unsalvageable
- Left a permanent marker, a permanent stain
- Smelled awful

I think you see where we're going. Genesis chapters 1 and 2 present a beautiful model of endless potential...and chapter 3 melts a model of perfect design and form into an irreversible mess, an un-erasable stain that is a permanent reminder of our failure to heed God's instruction manual; and a stench in the nostrils of God.

I'm sure every one of us could tell the same kind of story: a time when you received a wonderful gift, or had a prized possession, only to watch it become spoiled, stained, and irreparably damaged, as it melts away before your eyes. Maybe it was a Christmas present that got broken before Christmas Day was over; maybe it was an earlier marriage you had before you became a believer; maybe it was a son or daughter, or a once-in-a-lifetime job...or just a model car. All of us have seen something ruined, damaged. And, what's more, all of us have done damage, have been the polluters...all of us have been agents of decay. No one is exempt.

We call Genesis 3 "The Fall," but that sounds almost accidental, as though we inadvertently trip and fall head over heels into sin; as though it's not really us to blame, just "Oops, we fell." But as the story makes clear, Adam and Eve deliberately chose their path; and the rest of us have followed in their footsteps.

And so one day we awake from this idyllic dream and everything is changed: our flawless model becomes a puddle of plastic—our marriage is a battle rather than a blessing—our once-promising job is tedious and joyless.

So we face life in the less than ideal world beyond the garden—in a hardscrabble world where nothing is easy, nothing is as it should be—a world broken until the end of time.

Is there anyone here who has not seen a dream turned to dust? A hope of perfection reduced to rubble?

This what sin does...

Adam and Eve tried to make a name for themselves. They believed they could become like God. Cain tried to make a name for himself. He believed there were many ways to God. Those swept up by the flood had just completely abandoned God.

What we've done is try to fashion our own pathways to God. We share Eve's sin and make *ourselves* God. We try to make a name for ourselves. Yet, all our attempts leave us farther from God and farther from the garden than ever.

The sad fact is: Sin changes everything.

And what's spoiled is far more important than a toy or model car.

What would you say is the most devastating effect of sin? Of all the things that sin ruins, what is the most costly? What would you say is the worst casualty of sin?

The most significant change? In one word?

Relationships.

In the beginning, God... God is in a perfectly loving relationship as the Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit desire to share this perfectly giving relationship with people. It's all about the relationships.

- **Relationship with God** - God walks in perfect harmony with His creation—He and man speak as perfect community.
- **Relationship with each other** - Man and woman extend that perfect community to each other - together they reflect God's image as community (naked!, no shame, total vulnerability)
- **Relationship with the creation** - They have a relationship with the earth, which produces its fruit generously, and the animals, over which man has been given dominion.

No death exists—everywhere there is life. It is all about relationships—with God, with each other, and with the planet.

But here's the thing about relationships: you can't force them. Relationships exist because they begin and thrive only with mutual consent. I can't force my wife to love me, and God doesn't force relationships either. When we choose to listen to a creature rather than the Creator, the first and greatest casualties are the relationships.

- Sin severs the relationship with God;
- Sin infects Adam and Eve's marriage relationship: they feel shame, and jockey for position with each other.
- The sin nature is inaugurated by Adam and Eve, and its tragic consequences are passed on to their offspring. Cain killing Abel demonstrates that every family relationship is infected with sin.
- The whole earth is cursed and begins to die—the relationship between man and his world changes forever.

This first chapter of *The Story* is vital to understanding God's Upper Story. The major doctrines of our faith are rooted here: sin and redemption. In the Bible, only the first two chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation give us a glimpse into life in a world without sin, a world as God intended it to be. When we compare our world with what the world was like before sin, we learn that nothing is as it should be. Nothing. Sin changes everything.

And here's why: it's infectious. Sin is an aphrodisiac in the worst possible way—sometimes it's one whiff and that's the ballgame. Said another way, sin is a communicable disease—it metastasizes throughout your life and your family. Just ask Adam and Eve about the effect of their sin on Cain and Abel. Ask the man who has told himself over and over again, “Just **one** drink.” Ask the man whose experience with porn

began with a magazine or two, and now has metastasized into a 2-3 hour online orgy every night, after his wife goes to bed.

Sin is virulent and noxious, so, here's the next point on your outline:

Remember: every *bite* matters.

Sin is a virus that circulates throughout the body. And so while the easiest thing to do sometimes is to excuse a dalliance—to rationalize an indulgence, another drink, a dishonest expense report, an affair, because hey, it's just this one time...it's ***never*** just one time. Sin is a stench that is distributed through the ventilation system where it penetrates every room, every compartment of our lives. And so, before you blow off the hundreds of small, seemingly insignificant decisions you make every day, think about what C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*:

"Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, of who you are, into something a little different from what it was before.

With all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a man that is in harmony with God, and with others, or else into one that is in a state of war with God, and with others. To be the one kind of creature is joy and peace; to be the other means madness, rage and eternal loneliness.

Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

One more quote...this one from *Newsweek*:

People often rationalize their actions by using the old phrase, "The end justifies the means." I'll do whatever I need to right now, and then later I'll do the right thing. The problem is that usually by the end, you've become the means.

—Anna Quindlen, *Newsweek*, May 26, 2008

And so before you take the next drink or a second look, remember: those small, insignificant choices actually define you. As you pluck the apple from the tree, just remember, *every bite matters*.

But now, the good news.

Immediately after the fall, God begins His plan to get us back into a right relationship with Him; and that Upper Story never changes even to the last chapter of the Bible.

1. **Promise**
2. **Covering**
3. **Provision**

1. The first step is a *promise* and a prophecy:

"From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Genesis 3:15

2. Second, God Himself makes a covering—clothes for Adam and Eve.

This signifies two important things: First, He loves them and wants them to be protected, now that the earth is cursed. But second, God clothes them specifically from an *animal's* skin — the blood of an animal is shed to cover their sin. God is inaugurating the precept that Blood is required—Death is required—to cover sin.

Later, an elaborate system of sacrifices of bulls, goats, and lambs would be instituted to atone for the people's sins. And then, thousands of years later, to complete the perfect work of the spotless Lamb, blood and death would be required once more...just this one last time...for the finished work of the salvation of mankind. What starts in the garden—blood shed by an animal for covering—ends at the cross, with the blood of a God dressed in humanity.

God third step is to preserve a remnant of humanity by saving Noah and his family from God's judgment on the world in the flood.

3. *God provides for his entire creation by saving those faithful to him.*

And so today, the church represents the Ark. Jesus is captain of the Church no less than Noah was captain of the Ark, because the church is the Ark in which God dwells, where He saves a community of people from a storm-tossed world full of death and defeat.

We live in a fallen world where people constantly ask the question, "How could a good God allow this evil to take place?" But God has only given us what we asked for: the ability to choose. Sin can come in the form of "natural evil" including natural disasters, disease, and death, or from intentional evil perpetrated one against another. Nothing is as it should be.

But God has promised that He will recreate the earth in the future and once again there will be no more evil, no death, no pain, and no tears. The world to come will be infinitely better than even the garden, because we will no longer have an opportunity to sin—Satan will be vanquished and God will once again dwell among us as He did with Adam and Eve.

In the meantime, gentlemen, as the last point on your outline, our mission is this:

We must learn to "reverse the curse."

Learn to reverse the curse—break the cycle—by resisting the temptations of the evil one, by representing God in the fallen world, by striving to restore broken relationships, and by remembering that *every bite matters*. Adam set a sin nature in motion for all of us—but it is possible...not just possible, but critical—for us to reverse the curse by remembering that

Every bite matters.

The Upper Story of God is that immediately after the first sin, the final act of redemption was promised. And with each successive story: Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Brad and Bill, Dick and Eric, Jim and Ron...with each successive story, including yours and mine, God shows His repeated faithfulness to redeem both ourselves and our choices. God is always the pursuer—following Adam and Eve out of the garden,

following Joseph to Egypt, pursuing his people as they wandered for 40 years in the desert, as they were exiled to Assyria and Babylon, and as they were dispersed in the first century. God is *always* the pursuer.

And so here is today's Equipping Point. You'll remember that each week, we are dedicated to equipping men to lead their families well, to be great spiritual leaders, and giving men one thing each week to focus on.

So here's today's Equipping Point: to be the spiritual leader of your family:

Be the pursuer.

We are still His image bearers. In His image. His likeness. You are a reflection of God to your family. I've said it 100 times—as a father, you are **God's designated hitter**. YOU are the father figure that represents Him to your kids. And as a husband, again, YOU are the image bearer. You represent Jesus Christ as you love and serve and give yourself up for your wife, because Jesus loved and served and gave Himself up for His church. You were made in His image, in His likeness, to carry out that mission.

And here's the mission:

The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'"

They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.

Isaiah 62:11-12

And if there's one thing that the entire Bible tells us about God, this "Upper Story," is that God is in relentless pursuit of man. God is always the pursuer. We will see in the next few weeks and months that there is no place He will not go, literally to hell and back, to pursue and redeem his children. And so let me ask...to what lengths would you go for your family's sake? How far would you pursue them?

You know, I've noticed something. I've been married over 23 years and I'm starting to see a pattern. Almost every time Cheryl and I have some sort of disagreement, or I get my feelings hurt, I get upset because of one thing: she stubbornly refuses to read my mind.

Just about every time we have a misunderstanding, I get all bent out of shape because she hasn't guessed what I'm upset about...she just refuses that telepathy thing and cannot, for the life of her, read my mind and magically discern what is bothering me. So I get this stupid, self-centered idea in my head that it's her job to have this miraculous discernment and anticipate my every need. After all, if she weren't so self-centered, she'd be more in

tune with me, do this mind-meld thing like Spock, and instantly and miraculously know what I need before I say it.

Sorry for the sarcasm, but do you see where I'm going? If the one consistent, never-wavering characteristic of God is that He is the eternal pursuer of mankind, then as His image bearer, I must be the pursuer of my family. I must take the initiative. I can't be pouty and childish and wait for everybody to come to me. I have to be the one to be a man, to take the first step, to open up first, to say "I'm sorry" first—as God's image bearer I must be the pursuer.

Listen to God's reproof of the pastors in Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost..."

—Ezekiel 34:2,4

I've got news for you: You are the primary shepherd, the pastor of your family. May it never be said of us, "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost..."

Perhaps, just perhaps, if Adam had been more attentive to Eve, if he had pursued her more deeply, perhaps she wouldn't have been alone when Satan approached her and tempted her. And today, this week, the ONE THING you can do to lead your family well, to be the spiritual leader, to represent God, is to be the pursuer. Listen intently as your wife and kids relate their day...volunteer to read *The Story* to them...be the first to apologize and pursue reconciliation...stop moping and sulking because she can't read your mind and open up.

To lead your family this week, be the first to speak up, the first to confess, the first to heal. Pursue your family as God has tenaciously pursued you, called you back from sin, called you to a higher purpose.

Sin has changed everything...everything but one thing: God and His character. Nothing can change that—and as His ambassadors, let us reflect His relentless pursuit of us.

Chapter 2: What Sin Changes, Faith Overcomes

The two key words that form the basis of the entire chapter are: “_____ ...”

- Make your descendants into a great nation
- Give you a land in which to dwell
- Bless all other nations through the nation of Israel

1. God's covenant is a _____ one.

The first lesson of how God builds a nation: _____—one
_____ at a time.

2. God purposely works through _____ vessels.

God uses _____ people to fulfill His _____ promises.

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7

3. God's promise is not dependent on our performance, but our _____.

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Gen. 15:6

Today's Equipping Point

No _____

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.

Ephesians 1:13-14

Discussion Questions

1. In what personal, individual ways has God spoken to **you**?
2. In what ways have you seen God use your brokenness to further His purposes?
3. With respect to your family, what will you intentionally **IN**source this week?

Teaching Script

What to do? In Chapter 1 of *The Story*, everything had started so well...so much promise.

God had given Adam and Eve every chance to succeed, but instead they chose for themselves. Their sin nature was passed down to such a horrific degree that God turned the great cosmic Etch-A-Sketch over and shook it until the earth literally had a clean slate. He had created mankind so that He could lavish His love upon them, but they chose independence and ingratitude. He could justifiably have written us off as easily as Countrywide writes off non-performing loans...cast us aside like a failed high school lab experiment. But as we saw last week, He saved a remnant—Noah's family—to give us a mulligan and start over. The only problem was that sin remained—not even the flood could wipe out the evil inclination of man's heart. What now?

The Upper Story of God's pursuit and redemption of the world is on grand display in Chapter 2 because, as the Master Builder and Architect, God takes things into His own hands. Man could not be trusted to do the right thing...left on our own, the earth would again become as corrupt as the pre-flood days. So God, in His astounding courtship of humanity, takes charge:

The two key words that form the basis of this entire chapter are: “***I will...***” Words of covenant commitment and promise that would mean nothing if spoken by anyone else. Man's promises to follow God, to be faithful, have about as much street cred as Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, or Lehman Bros. We had demonstrated our fickleness: obeying God when it's convenient, but ditching Him when it's not.

This time, there could be no “if's”—no contingencies. The plan to save mankind had to rest on ***bedrock***, so God said, “***I will...***” His words were the ironclad guarantee. And so, His master plan to restore us to Himself gets a fresh start with these words. In spite of our unreliable, inconsistent, erratic behavior, God is ***determined*** to fulfill His promise. And so God says:

I will . . .

- Make your descendants into a great nation
- Give you a land in which to dwell
- Bless all other nations through the nation of Israel

The first thing to note about this chapter (on outline) is this:

1. God's covenant is a ***personal*** one.

I think if I were God I'd be tempted to take a shortcut and pick one cloudless night, wake everybody up and rearrange the stars where they spelled the words, “GOD IS” or “I EXIST,” where suns dot the I's and comets cross the T's. Can you imagine the results of such a grand demonstration? There would be no need for a personal revelation, really no need for the Holy Spirit to take up residence within us—just a permanent celestial billboard. In effect, God would ***outsource*** the proof of His existence to the universe. Some would think it was a hoax, but I suspect most people would walk outside and fall to

their knees. Some would run back into their houses in sheer terror, but eventually everyone would see the words “GOD IS” blazing in the heavens. Wars would stop, crime would stop, churches would fill to overflowing.

For a while, that would be enough. Decades, centuries later, every night, God’s proof of Himself would be blazing away in the heavens. But there would still be something missing: while God was demonstrating Himself to be Lord of the Heavens, what I need to know is, does His Spirit move within ME, over the turbulent waters of my life. God may prove His existence with a message in the stars, but unless He speaks to me and my circumstance, unless His existence changes MY world, does it really matter that He set the whole thing spinning millions of years ago?

So this is the first lesson of *how God builds a nation: individually—one person at a time*. He appeared and spoke to Abraham several times: when He first called him, when the three visitors came by, to announce Sarah’s pregnancy...over and over again, God’s arrival is a personal one. When Jacob had gotten by all those years with trickery and cunning, God knew a personal encounter was needed to move him from con artist to convert, so He appeared and wrestled with Jacob all night. And when it was over, Jacob understood grace for the first time.

Instead of writing an impersonal message in the stars, God comes to us, *one-by-one*, in the circumstances of our lives. Where has He appeared to you?

- Perhaps through the tough but honest counsel of a friend?
- Through the undeserved love and acceptance of your wife? I can’t tell you how many men I’ve met who have humbly labeled their wives the Holy Spirit. They see and hear God speaking to them daily through a woman who knows them completely, and who has permission to speak the truth openly. Does your wife have that permission?
- Perhaps God has personally appeared to you through an obstacle, a defeat—some sort of setback that stops you dead in your tracks and requires you to work out some character issues.
- Has God personally revealed Himself through the imperfect, flawed characters we studied last year like Elijah who was depressed, Job who was defiant, or Naaman whose pride almost left him a permanent leper?

Where has He met you, challenged you, broken you, for His sake? The first lesson of Chapter 2 of *The Story* is that God is so gracious, so loving, that He meets each of us not through a celestial text message, but in the daily events of our lives: a Creator humble enough to approach us in the smile of a child, in a career setback, on the battlefield, or under our own roof, always willing to process with us, to wrestle with us, to entertain our hard questions. A God who doesn’t need to explain Himself to anyone—but who, out of love, has touched each one of us personally, and led us from darkness to light. THAT is a God worthy of our worship.

And that is point #1 today: God doesn’t write messages in the stars; He invites and solicits and coaxes...He forages through a wasteland of sin and debris, *just to win you back*.

Takeaway #2 in this story of Abraham and his family is this:

2. God purposely works through broken vessels.

You know, after reading Chapter 2, it would seem God's choice of a nation and a people, with all due respect, wasn't all that solid. These guys were a mess!

Look what happened:

- Abraham picked up stakes and moved all right, but he lied twice about Sarah not being his wife to save his own neck, apparently not trusting God's promise enough to keep him alive.
- Because God didn't produce an heir as quickly as they thought He should, they opted for a workaround and Abraham slept with Sarah's maid Hagar, which led to all sorts of hurt feelings and domestic complications.
- When Isaac, the son of promise finally comes, he marries Rebekah and raises one of the most dysfunctional families recorded in the Bible. Isaac favors Esau, but Rebekah favors Jacob, and the kids become pawns in this passive-aggressive relationship of their parents. Anyone ever seen a child become a puppet between two parents in a dysfunctional family? This is Isaac and Rebekah to a "T".
- As the parents play the kids against each other, Rebekah creates this elaborate hoax to trick her husband into giving the paternal blessing to Jacob, not Esau.
- Jacob, who has now learned that deception and trickery is obviously the way to get ahead in life, so he plays his brother for a fool and then has to get out of Dodge to save his own skin.
- Jacob's uncle Laban, also a graduate of the Machiavellian School of Deceit, slips the wrong daughter between the sheets and cons Jacob into another seven years of work.
- Jacob gets back at his uncle, however, by concocting an elaborate breeding caper with the goat herds that guarantee Jacob has the last laugh.

Now remember, this is the family through whom all nations of the world would be blessed!

The point is this: God uses broken people to fulfill His unbreakable promises. On a day-to-day basis, God's people continue to make bad choices that expose their sin nature. And from Chapter 2 through the rest of the Bible, God uses deeply flawed, schizophrenic people to illustrate the Upper Story of His pursuit and redemption of the world. Who would've thunk? Samson? David? Jonah? These guys were a mess!

(pause...)

I can't tell you how many men I've spoken with that are convinced that the mistakes of their past disqualifies them from leading their families well today. If you leave with nothing else this morning, leave with this: if God could use the liars, cheats, cowards, swindlers, and fools from this chapter to build a nation, He can use you. In fact, these guys were the foundation—He began the whole process of building a nation on the backs of this rag-tag band of misfits.

So this morning, wherever you are on your journey—kicking the tires, checking out this whole Jesus concept, a long-time believer, or just convicted you should do something but you're not sure what, this chapter is for you. This is why Paul says:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7

It's not about you, or your competence, or your personal toolkit. To be a man of God requires you to do the hardest thing possible: give up your self-sufficiency and admit you're a fragile, broken, imperfect clay pot instead of Mr. Fix-it. Then, you'll start to resemble these guys, these Keystone Kops of the Old Testament—because God's selection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not based on their IQ or the title on their business card, but on one thing and one thing only: their faith.

Which leads us to point #3:

3. God's promise is not dependent on our performance, but our faith.

After such a devastating start in Chapter 1, what could Adam and Eve do? Their disobedience, the fratricide between their sons, and a worldwide, soggy mulligan—what could the people do to restore what was lost?

The answer: believe. Look at the title of the lesson today: What sin changed in the Garden, faith overcomes for the rest of *The Story*. In spite of their failures, God's people respond in faith. Abraham picks up stakes and travels to a foreign land just because God said to. He graciously gives his nephew Lot the choice real estate, having faith God would still bless him. Abraham and Sarah laugh hysterically when they finally see God fulfill His promise through the birth of a son, Isaac. And in one of the most touching scenes in the OT, God joins with them in the absurdity of the situation by having them name their son Isaac, which means "laughter" in Hebrew. Later, in a shocking episode, Abraham shows he is willing to go so far as sacrificing his only son, Isaac, because of his faith in God.

Later on, this crazy, dysfunctional family, with all its flaws, continued to demonstrate faith. By faith, Isaac finds a wife for his son. Jacob comes to faith after literally wrestling with God. By faith, Esau also shows Jacob grace and forgiveness. With every story, we are reminded that God works through flawed people who take steps of faith. It turns out the people of the Old Testament were saved the same way you and I are: by faith.

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.

Romans 4:20-21

The key verse of the chapter is:

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Genesis:15:6

Therein lies the Gospel itself. Abraham had faith in God, and God deposited righteousness into Abraham's account. It was unearned—it was a gift. God took something that belonged only to Jesus—righteousness—and gave it to Abraham as his own.

Once again, a whisper of Jesus appears—a key clue to the Upper Story is given: the Bible says that as Abraham and Isaac journeyed up the mountain for the sacrifice of this long-awaited boy on whom the future Kingdom rested, the wood for the sacrifice was placed on Isaac, just as Jesus was forced to carry the cross. Abraham's extraordinary faith is what saved him, just as today, putting our faith in Christ saves us. It's just that simple: to believe, despite the messages to be self-made, independent and cool, that God can use even the weakest and the lamest of us to do something miraculous.

Who would have guessed that God would keep His promise and Sarah would deliver a baby with one foot in maternity and the other foot in the geriatric ward? Who would have guessed that even after Isaac and Rebekah used their sons as pawns, Esau would later have the grace and mercy to forgive the conniving Jacob? In case you missed it, here again is the Upper Story of God: a wronged brother named Esau, cheated out of what was rightly his, offering his younger brother forgiveness and grace. ***Esau*** is a harbinger of Jesus himself.

The signs and the clues of God's grand plan of forgiveness and redemption are woven throughout chapter two...which brings us to our weekly **Equipping Point**.

Men, to lead your families well this week, here's the deal: **no outsourcing**.

No outsourcing. God could have easily written a message in the stars and outsourced His revelation to the Milky Way galaxy. But He said, "***I*** will..." He inspired and laughed with Abraham, He personally wrestled with Jacob. And now He personally resides in every believer by depositing His essence into each of us:

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.

Ephesians 1:13-14

The Equipping Point today is:

No outsourcing.

As good as our children's and student ministries are at Oak Hills, our children's spiritual formation is NOT their responsibility. Nothing—nothing in the world replaces YOUR VOICE—not a teacher, not a youth pastor, not a preacher. Even if you're not sure how, even if you're a little self-conscious, it's OK! God doesn't grade prayers on eloquence—He looks at the heart behind the request.

Last week, I was in my office and Catherine sheepishly walks in and says, “Um, uh, Dad, could you, uh, help me with my geometry?” She’s smart enough to know I’m one of the last people to be of any help whatsoever when it comes to geometry. And *at that point, I had a choice*—fear almost took over. I could have outsourced it, and said, “Go ask your mother.” Or, “Well, have you asked your teacher for help?” Or, “How about if I get you a tutor next week and they’ll help you?”

But something stopped me, and I said, “OK, let’s take a look.” It took us about 45 minutes, but I gotta tell you, that 45 minutes changed my week, because at the end, after we had waded through it together, and re-familiarized myself with complementary and linear angles, she said, “Now I understand... Why can’t **you** be my geometry teacher?”

Believe me, the last thing Clark H.S. needs is for me to be one of their geometry teachers. But I’ve discovered that trying is what counts. Like we said a couple of weeks ago, it’s not about having all the answers, or being afraid to look clueless to your kids, because I really was. But we sat down together and tried to work through it. It didn’t dawn on me until after we were done that it honored my daughter that even though we might have totally bombed the homework, the bigger message was that she was important enough to invest the time.

Our resolve today is NO OUTSOURCING—no “go ask your mom” or “let’s find a tutor.”

Just imagine... just imagine if God had somehow outsourced us, instead of depositing His Spirit within us. The message this week is to have faith that God will equip you to love your wife, pray with your kids, or even do geometry. The rule is: no outsourcing... YOUR voice is too valuable, too prized. YOUR voice, like God’s is irreplaceable.

Chapter 3: What God Intended

The life of Joseph from a _____ standpoint:

1. _____ or under - _____.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

1 Corinthians 12:7

He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

2 Corinthians 1:4

"The job does not _____.

The man _____."

2. On the job, _____ means everything.

"The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity."

Proverbs 11:3

"The Lord hates people with twisted hearts, but he delights in those who have integrity."

Proverbs 11:20

The Lord hates dishonest scales, but he is pleased with honest weights.

Proverbs 11:1

Flee from sexual immorality...

1 Corinthians 6:18

Flee from idolatry...

1 Corinthians 10:14

Flee the evil desires of youth...

2 Timothy 2:22

So give yourselves completely to God. Stand against the devil, and the devil will run from you.

James 4:7

Sometimes the best way to take a stand is to _____.

In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose.

—Dwight Eisenhower

Today's Equipping Point

Be _____

“Give me an _____ heart.”

Psalms 86:11

3. We must learn to deal with _____.

“After Joseph had been taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites, Potiphar an Egyptian, one of Pharaoh's officials and the manager of his household, bought him from them. As it turned out, God was with Joseph and things went very well with him. He ended up living in the home of his Egyptian master. His master recognized that God was with him, saw that God was working for good in everything he did.”
Genesis 39:1-3

Today, we are building _____.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we allow our jobs to define us so much?
2. How is attitude toward your job related to spiritual leadership?
3. What specifically will you change today about yourself? Who will keep you accountable for this?

Teaching Script

A man once walked by a building site and saw three stone masons side by side, sweating over their work in the hot sun. He asked the first, "What are you doing?"

"Laying bricks" came the reply.

He asked the second stone mason, "And what are you doing?"

"Building a wall" came the reply.

Then he asked the third mason, "And what is it you are doing?"

"I am building a great cathedral."

Today, what will you be doing? Laying bricks or building cathedrals?

This week we come to Chapter 3 of *The Story*, and the tale of Joseph. There have probably been hundreds and thousands of sermons preached on Joseph, but today I'd like to come at it from a different angle, one I've not heard before. I'd like us to talk about the theology of work, based on the life of Joseph.

I don't have to tell you that a man's professional life is at heart of his self-worth and self-definition. And it strikes me that potentially no one in the Bible, Old or New Testament, had to have a better grip on the consequences of his work than Joseph. And so, in a 6 a.m. Bible study where most of us will leave here to go to **work**, it seems appropriate that we ask the question:

Today, what will you be doing? Laying bricks or building cathedrals?

You're familiar with the story—Joseph is his father's favorite, but betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. He works well for Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, until he's set up by Potiphar's wife, and gets thrown into prison. There, he serves the prison warden well, and eventually his gifts for interpreting dreams land him in front of Pharaoh himself. And in his third job, he doesn't just manage a house or a prison well—he manages the entire country, and saves Israel in the process.

Can I give you three things that really stick with me from the life of Joseph from a **vocational** standpoint?

1. Unemployment or under-employment.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4.10)

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

1 Corinthians 12:7

He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

2 Corinthians 1:4

If anyone could be deemed as under-employed, it was Joseph. But we see that he always used his gifts of leadership and dream interpretation wherever he was.

I'm guessing with this many guys here, we have a range of experiences present this morning: most if not all of us have been under-employed if not totally *UN*employed. Many, if not most, of us have been passed over, screwed over, or just run over in our jobs. And some of us in this room, right now, are dealing with pink slips, disappointment, anger, and all the resulting financial pressure and emotional fallout.

But according to Joseph, every job deserves your best, no matter what you're doing or where. Paul agreed:

Servants, do what you're told by your earthly masters. And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being Christian doesn't cover up bad work.

Colossians 3:22-25

In Joseph's story, we learn that God put him squarely in each circumstance precisely because that's where his gifts were needed, *at that point in time*. I'm wondering if we can't say the same thing.

Before we moved to San Antonio, I went through a ten-month period of unemployment. It was humiliating, it was depressing, it was a bad time. During that year my daughters were in 2nd and 4th grade; but as it turned out, since I didn't have a job, every day I took them to school. Every day I picked them up from school. Every day I was at home and available to immediately hear about their day, help with homework, and just generally be a dad, when normally I would have been stuck in a meeting or in traffic. Is it possible, I wonder, that for that season, while my kids were still young, God had me right where He wanted me, and that even in such a difficult season, my job was to bloom where I was planted right then?

If you find yourself in some version of a dungeon, between a rock and a hard place, with far more questions than answers, may I suggest that if in fact God is sovereign, you might, like Joseph, be right where you're supposed to be?

I don't know who said it, but it's certainly true:

"The job does not make the man. The man makes the job."

So, bloom where you are planted.

This leads us to our second takeaway:

2. On the job, character means everything.

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Proverbs 11:3

The Lord hates people with twisted hearts, but he delights in those who have integrity.

Proverbs 11:20

The Lord hates dishonest scales, but he is pleased with honest weights.

Proverbs 11:1

We hear about integrity, or the lack of it, every week in the news:

- Eliot Spitzer—moral crusader, laws against sex tourism and prostitution, part of ‘escort sting’ operation
- Mark Foley—congressman, crusader against child exploitation, sends explicit text messages to young pages
- Larry Craig—Republican family values senator, caught in MN airport restroom on gay solicitation

And it’s not just politicians on the evening news; there’s the man who pads his expense account, who mentally undresses his co-worker every day, who lies about having to work late.

Joseph had a lot of responsibility; but he took integrity so seriously that when his master’s wife made a play for him, he ran.

Monty Python: “Run away! Run away!”

Flee from sexual immorality...

1 Corinthians 6:18

Flee from idolatry...

1 Corinthians 10:14

Flee the evil desires of youth...

2 Timothy 2:22

So give yourselves completely to God. Stand against the devil, and the devil will run from you.

James 4:7

Sometimes the best way to take a stand is to get the heck out.

This brings us to our Equipping Point for today:

In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. If a man’s associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose.

—Dwight Eisenhower

Today's Equipping Point:

Be consistent.

"Give me an undivided heart."

Psalm 86:11

You can go to church, join a small group, come to our men's group...but if you lead a compartmentalized life...

Remember those verses from Proverbs 11...

If you're a different person at home than at work, if your vocabulary is different, if the surfing history on your computer is different at home than at work, then let us take a page from Joseph's work history and as we lead our families spiritually, let's be men with undivided hearts.

And last...Joseph's story shows us that on our jobs...

3. We must learn to deal with disappointment.

After Joseph had been taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites, Potiphar, an Egyptian, one of Pharaoh's officials and the manager of his household, bought him from them. As it turned out, GOD was with Joseph and things went very well with him. He ended up living in the home of his Egyptian master. His master recognized that GOD was with him, saw that GOD was working for good in everything he did.

Genesis 39:1-3

Let us stop at this point and re-read last part of verse 1: Joseph had just been bought. He had gone from his father's favorite, splendidly clothed and highly favored, to being someone's property. I doubt that any of us who have been fired, passed over for a promotion or betrayed by a colleague have ever gone from heir apparent to **property**. But despite this precipitous fall in stature, the Bible says there was something about Joseph...something about him that was so winsome, so attractive, so appealing, that "his master recognized God was with him, and saw that God was working for good in everything he did."

How was that possible? How could someone who had been bushwhacked by his brothers, left for dead, then sold to someone who just happened to be walking by...how was it possible that when Joseph landed, the man who bought him in the same way he would have purchased cattle, saw God in his life?

The only way is that Joseph had what we discussed last week: faith. No matter where he found himself, he never doubted God had a plan for his life. Joseph had unlocked a key to occupational success that most men never achieve: he learned that God is sovereign, and that in each of our lives, there is always an Upper Story.

Some of you are hacked off today because of some surprises. You've been terminated without cause or without notice...you've been personally wounded by the actions of a former boss...cast off by a company...neglected by a bureaucracy.

But guys, if we do not deal directly with our bitterness and overcome our disappointment, God will never be evident in our lives. If I continue to carry a grudge against a current or former boss, NO ONE will ever come up to me and say what was said about Joseph: "You know, I'm noticing that GOD is really with you, He just seems to reside with you. I've noticed that GOD is working for good in everything you do..."

Let me just ask: has anyone ever said those words to you at work? Has anyone ever watched you in meetings, observed your work habits, listened to how you talk about your boss, your wife, your family, and said that your work and your attitude is so compelling, so engaging, it just seems that God must be with you? I confess to you that *nobody ever* said anything like that to me when I worked for MCI or North American Van Lines.

Our tendency is to get our pound of flesh, exact our revenge, get in the last word.

Listen, I know it's hard. I've been fired...I've been passed over...I've been put inside a box where my giftedness was allowed to hit on maybe three out of eight cylinders...I've been relegated to a position that utilized a fraction of what I had to offer. I'm sure you have too.

But is it possible that you and I are sometimes put in humbling circumstances so that God can work out some character issues deep inside? Is it possible that, just like Joseph, our faith needs to be challenged that even in slavery, or a dungeon, unemployed or under-employed, un-utilized and forgotten—is it possible that a difficult professional environment has a higher purpose? An Upper Story? A bigger picture?

I think Joseph must have figured that out. I think he must have discovered that if God is sovereign, if in fact nothing is accidental or haphazard, that his disturbing condition was not an indication of God's absence, but a part of His plan, and a crucial step in Joseph's journey to becoming a man.

Is it possible today that wherever you find yourself professionally, the same thing is true? And that we, like Joseph, must have an unshakable faith that wherever we are today is precisely where we need to be?

Do you, like Peter, have the faith to say, "*Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.*" Luke 5:5

These 13 chapters of Genesis describe a roller-coaster life of ups and downs that paints a very clear picture of what faith looks like up close and personal—of what it means to say, "OK Jesus, because you say so, because you put me here, I'll do it. I don't see the point, I'm pretty burned out, but because you say so, I'll let down my nets again and do my best."

The movie, *Mr. Holland's Opus*

- A musician who struggles to find success in life
- Dreams of composing a magnificent symphony that will be played by orchestras across the world

- But the real world has bills to pay, so takes a job as a high school music teacher—save money and write later
- He absolutely hates teaching, but wife gets pregnant
- Throughout movie he changes
 - comes to love teaching
 - finds ways to inspire his students to love music
 - to find their self confidence.

Thirty years pass and Mr. Holland is about to retire. On his final day he packs up his desk and heads for his car. On the way he hears music coming from the auditorium. He goes to see what's happening. He opens the door to find the auditorium filled with his students from the past thirty years. They're playing a piece of music he wrote. It's a concert in his honor. And then one of Mr. Holland's former students delivers a speech:

"Mr. Holland had a profound influence in my own life, yet I get the feeling that he considers the greater part of his own life misspent. He was always working on that symphony of his, to become rich and famous. But Mr. Holland isn't rich, and he isn't famous, so it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he would be wrong.

*"Look around you, Mr. Holland. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched. We are better because of you. Mr. Holland, **we** are your symphony. **We** are the melodies and the notes of your opus. **We** are the music of your life."*

Without knowing it, Mr. Holland had been writing a different concerto—a work that touched lives in a way he couldn't see.

In the same way, Joseph was commissioned to do work that on the surface, could be seen as humiliating, frustrating—a slave, in prison—*just laying bricks*. But like Mr. Holland, he later discovered he was doing something far greater: he was saving his nation.

Today, would you resolve with me in faith that there is an Upper Story not just to Joseph's jobs, but to yours, and to mine. And that despite the failures and obstacles, our work matters greatly. Because we are not just laying bricks, or selling pharmaceuticals, or teaching students. In your family, with your staff, in your team, you have temples of the Holy Spirit.

Today, we are building cathedrals.

[Prayer]

Father, we have been convicted today by this great man of faith. Make us men of character, that have consistent lives and undivided hearts. Give us an unshakable faith to deal with the disappointments that are sure to come. Remind us we are investing in lives—we are building cathedrals.

Chapter 4: Equipped for the Call

God “Telegraphs” What He’s Up To

Joseph/Jesus

- The favored son of his father
- His father sent him to his brothers who rejected him
- Robes taken from him
- Taken to Egypt to avoid being killed
- Sold for the price of a slave
- Tempted
- Falsely accused
- Condemned between two prisoners
- 30 years old at beginning of recognition
- Forgave those who wronged him
- His suffering eventually led him to a place of prominence and honor
- His suffering was to save the lives of those he loved
- His brothers bowed their knees to him at last

Moses/Jesus

- Called from a distant land
- Called to true heritage
- 400 years of silence precedes arrival
- Survived infanticide
- 40 days
- Prince of Egypt, Prince of Peace
- Rejected
- Delivered from bondage
- Series of miracles led up to final salvation
- Final victory: death of firstborn/one and only Son
- Victory over tormentors: Egypt & Satan
- Passover—blood on doorpost
- Even after deliverance, doubt, fear, rebellion, effects of sin still linger

Principles

1. God does not _____—
he _____.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Revelation 2:17

2. God has a systematic way of dealing with _____.

- The god of _____
- The god of _____
- The god of _____
- The god of _____
- The god of _____
- The _____ god
- The _____ god

3. God's "_____" is our hope.

Today's Equipping Point

Put your _____

Discussion Questions

1. Can you recall a time when you undertook something for which you were totally unequipped?
2. What gods have you been stripped of?
3. How will you be a Deliverer today?

Teaching Script

“Don’t telegraph it!”

Basketball: don’t look in the direction you intend to drive, don’t telegraph where you’re going to pass. Used to know a guy who outsmarted himself and always looked away from his passes—still telegraphing, just didn’t know it.

It’s the same with contact sports: Martial artists, wrestling, boxing. You can unconsciously telegraph your intentions. Coaches tell wrestlers and boxers: don’t draw back before striking...don’t shift your stance...don’t move your eyes...don’t grimace or take a deep breath before going into motion.

In fact there are many professions where it’s critical to “read” the competition: skilled negotiators and military strategists keep their intentions less obvious to gain the advantage and never lose the power of surprise.

In poker terminology, this is called a “tell.” A “tell” is any physical reaction, behavior, or habit that gives (or tells) the other players information about your hand. Body language: facial expressions, eye movements, eye contact, breathing, verbal cues (words and tone).

My youngest daughter would be a lousy poker player. Cheryl and I learned early on that Tori could not keep a secret to save her life. We couldn’t tell her what we’d gotten the other for birthdays or Christmas because inevitably, she’d get that sparkle in her eyes, giggle, and oops, “let it slip.”

As we move into Chapter 4 of *The Story*, let’s first go back to Joseph briefly, because in poker terms, Joseph was a “tell.” In a manner of speaking, God “let it slip.”

The Upper Story of grace, forgiveness, and redemption is unmistakable here. God’s ways are often mysterious and unfathomable, but in Joseph He telegraphs what He’s been up to. Joseph’s life story nearly gives the whole thing away. It’s almost like God can barely stand to keep the secret.

Joseph/Jesus

- The favored son of his father
- His father sent him to his brothers who rejected him
- Robes taken from him
- Taken to Egypt to avoid being killed
- Sold for the price of a slave
- Tempted
- Falsely accused
- Condemned between two prisoners
- 30 years old at beginning of recognition
- Forgave those who wronged him
- His suffering eventually led him to a place of prominence and honor
- His suffering was to save the lives of those he loved
- His brothers bowed their knees to him at last

If Joseph's life nearly gives the whole redemption thing away, then the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt removes all doubt; God doesn't just telegraph where He might be going, He shows His hand, lays His cards on the table, and makes His long-term plan—The Upper Story—as clear as day.

The two main events of the whole Bible are the Exodus and the Christ. The importance of either cannot be underestimated. The first event points directly to the second.

Moses/Jesus

- Called from a distant land (heaven)
- Called to true heritage (man made in His image—redeem His own)
- 400 years of silence precedes
- Survived infanticide
- 40 days
- The Prince of Egypt, the Prince of Peace
- Rejected
 - Who made you ruler and judge?
 - Despised and rejected of men
- Delivered their people from bondage
- Series of miracles led up to final salvation
 - Nile turned to blood
 - Boils
 - Frogs
 - Hail
 - Gnats
 - Locusts
 - Flies
 - 3 Days of Darkness
 - Death of livestock
 - Death of Firstborn
- Jesus' miracles
 - Made fig tree die
 - Hunger—feeding 5000
 - Cast out demons
 - Sickness
 - Raised the dead
- Final victory: death of firstborn/one and only Son
- Victory over tormentors: Egypt & Satan
- Passover—blood on doorpost...blood on doorpost to heaven: cross
- Even after deliverance:
 - Doubt, fear, rebellion, longed for bondage, old circumstances
 - Effects of sin still linger (post flood, deliverance, cross)

The similarities are stunning when you lay these stories side by side; God has shown His hand...this is where we're headed.

But God does more here than just telegraph Jesus—He telegraphs His character and modus operandi. How does God operate? How does He do His work in the world? How does He interact with His people? The story of the Exodus is critical because God also reveals a pattern of engagement:

Principles

1. God does not call the equipped—he equips the called.

Moses was an 80-year-old man with only “ex-prince” and “shepherd” listed on his resume. But as God is prone to do, He selects men from nowhere, without credentials or experience, to make sure people know Who is really behind the victories. He did it with a stammering Moses, and we’ll see Him do it over and over: with Joshua, with a reluctant Gideon, with a depressed Elijah, with a shepherd boy named David, with a scaredy-cat named Jonah, with a small-town carpenter from Nazareth, and with fishermen and tax collectors from Galilee.

You may be in the same boat and be thinking, ‘*My spiritual resume is anorexic. How am I supposed to lead my family? Where’s the Cliff Notes on how to be a husband and a dad? How am I supposed to step up to the plate?*’

Over and over, God demonstrates throughout Scripture that He doesn’t hire a headhunter and conduct an executive search for men with advanced degrees, Masters of the Universe, or titans of business. God looks not at the resume but at the heart; not at the accomplishments, but at the potential.

And He does it backward for a reason: God equips the called so that each step we take, we take because of faith in Him to provide, not because we have accurately wargamed each scenario. God equips the called because every day we need to hear from Him—we need new manna to survive, because discipleship is a moment-by-moment decision. God equips the called because a heart is transformed when confronted with a summons to true greatness. God equips the called because, as Revelation puts it, our identity has changed:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Revelation 2:17

If you haven’t gotten it all figured out yet, if you’re still searching for the owner’s manual, if you don’t feel equipped for tomorrow, much less the entire journey, then God’s got you right where He wants you. The challenge: “Embrace your cluelessness”—because one step at a time, one meeting at a time, one plague at a time, one miracle at a time...God will equip those He calls—and He has called **you**.

2. God has a systematic way of dealing with *competition*.

There is a reason that the first of the Ten Commandments is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” God’s jealousy requires that He systematically mow down pretend gods just as a carnival patron mows down those plastic ducks all in a row.

You may not be aware, but the ten plagues on Egypt: water into blood, frogs, boils, hail, etc., were not just random strikes at Egypt, but a carefully choreographed defeat of their pagan gods. Now, this isn’t for the next fill-in section, but just catch how God dealt with His competition in Egypt:

Plague	Egyptian god defeated by plague
Nile turned to blood	Hapi & Isis, goddess of Nile
Frogs	Haget, goddess of fertility-frog head
Gnats	Set, god of the desert
Flies	Uatchit, represented by a fly
Death of livestock	Hathor/Apis, cow, bull
Boils	Sekhmet, goddess of disease
Hail	Nut, sky goddess
Locusts	Osiris, god of crops and fertility
Darkness	Re, the sun god
Death of firstborn	Min, god of reproduction

And just as God shot down the paper-mache props the Egyptians trusted in, so today He is careful to lovingly but deliberately bring us to our knees by defeating our gods:

(write down)

- The god of **work**, where everything is sacrificed on the altar of the next promotion, next rung on the ladder
- The god of **self-sufficiency**, that denies the need for new manna every day
- The god of **legalism** that demands to always be right
- The god of **pride** that requires I get what's coming to me ("my boss owes me this, my wife owes me that, my kids owe me")
- The god of **addictions** to alcohol, sex, gambling or work
- The **Vending Machine** god who exists only to cater to MY preferences
- The **9-1-1** god who dispatches a wrecker when I get into trouble

The deliverance from Egypt teaches us to be careful of the gods we construct, because the One True God has demonstrated He has a rather harsh way of dealing with competition.

And third...

3. God's "**tell**" is our hope.

Could you imagine if God had not telegraphed how it all works out? Without the stories of Joseph and Moses, we wouldn't know that the Upper Story of God had been planned and prototyped centuries before. We wouldn't see that yes, in fact, in the end, God works **all things** for good for those **called** to His purpose. We wouldn't know that if we like Joseph were in a 22-year span of uncertainty, or like Moses in a 40-year span of waiting, that God in fact has an Upper Story—a great plan—in store for all of us.

Without the story of the Exodus, we would never be able to grasp the absurd, outlandish extent to which God will go to win us back. The sins He would forgive, the patience He would show, the pursuit that would never end.

And so this morning, each one of us needs to be asked this question:

"From what do you need to be delivered?"

Some of you may still be test-driving this whole Christianity thing—and what you need to be delivered from, for the first time, is your sins—your old way of life and to commit to a life of higher purpose and calling in Christ.

Some of us need to be delivered from those addictions that are literal *plagues* on our lives.

Some of us need to be delivered from a deep, still-scabbed *father wound*—abandonment, lack of affirmation or attention. We didn't have an example, a standard, to observe how to be a godly husband or father to our wives and children.

Some of us need to be delivered from our own past—from the sins of a previous marriage, from the demons of history that still taunt us with what we *used to be called*, rather than our *new name* carved on a white stone.

If you have not had a burning bush moment, a moment where your true identity changed, a moment that brought you out of hiding and denial into freedom and light, then *today* can be your deliverance.

Which leads to our Equipping Point for today:

Put your mask on first.

There's a reason they tell you to do this on an airplane. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of those around you.

I'm so glad you're here—it means that you know *you* need to be filled before you can pour into others' lives. It means you know you need to put your own mask on first. It means you know you need to deal with your own demons before you can lead others into the light—in other words, before you become a deliverer.

That's your charge today: Become a deliverer. Become the leader of your family that walks by faith through new territory. That trusts God to equip you because you've been called, not to call you because you're already so smart. Be a deliverer that has mowed down the false gods of his own life to be Jesus to others—to help deliver them from darkness and bondage.

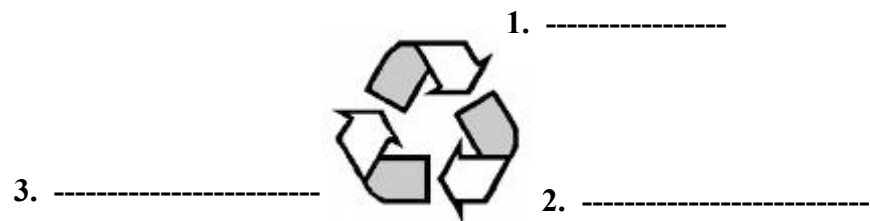
You may not know how to relate to your wife on an emotional level. You may be clueless on how to deal with your strong-willed child. You may be unsure where to step professionally because of the economic climate.

Just remember, God equips the called. God goes before us just as He did Moses. Our marching orders are clear: first, admit what you need to be delivered from. Put your mask on first.

And then second, become a deliverer—equipped with daily manna, in a posture of prayer, one step at a time, as you lead your family and your marketplace “out of darkness and into His marvelous light.”

Chapter 5: Be Different

A three-stage, cyclical pattern:



1. The gravitational force of _____.

Aaron answered, "Don't be angry, master. You know that these people are always ready to do wrong. The people said to me, 'Moses led us out of Egypt, but we don't know what has happened to him. Make us gods who will lead us.' So I told the people, 'Take off your gold jewelry.' When they gave me the gold, I threw it into the fire and out came this calf!"

Exodus 32:22-25

Aaron's excuses:

- a. _____
- b. _____?
- c. _____??

2. Phase Two: _____.

Today's Equipping Point

Be an _____

Definition: "to act or interpose in behalf of someone in difficulty or trouble, by petition; to attempt to reconcile differences between two people; to plead on another's behalf."

3. Phase Three: The gift of His _____.

"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Exodus 33:14

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30

"Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left."

Isaiah 30:21

Discussion Questions

1. How "set apart" (different) are you from the world?
2. Where is sin's gravitational force the strongest in your life?
3. How will you intercede today?

Teaching Script

Let's start today with a film clip. This is from the third of the Godfather movies, and I want you to pay close attention to what the priest is saying to Michael Corleone. The theme of Chapter 5 of *The Story* is to be different. Listen to what the priest says about the stone in the fountain...

Video Feature:

To illustrate how society has not let Christ change them on the inside, show a clip from Godfather III:

At the beginning of Chapter 24 of the DVD, Pacino goes to the bishop and they have a chat outside by the fountain. The bishop references the smooth stones and how the water has not permeated them for all these years. He then makes a telling comment about how society follows Christ but is not changed on the inside.

Did you hear what he said? After he noted the submerged stone was perfectly dry on the inside, he said, "For centuries, men have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ does not live within them."

If there was ever an appropriate object lesson for our study today, it's this one. Consider what has just happened to God's children:

They have been miraculously delivered from physical bondage in Egypt. They have camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, and through lightning, thunder, thick clouds, trumpets and dense smoke, God has made it clear he is there as well.

He gives Moses the Ten Commandments, precepts to guide them to holiness, to take up residence with a holy God. In fact, God promises to reside with them in a newly constructed Tabernacle, so that His holiness may dwell with them.

Before long, however, as Moses receives God's instruction on the mountain, Israel becomes impatient and decides to create a tangible god, an idol made of things *they* deem of worth: gold and precious metals. God's anger burns against this rejection, because His people refuse to be unlike everyone else. Moses intercedes for the people and begs God's mercy. And while punishment still comes through death and plague, God's presence is still with the people, in the form of a cloud over the Tabernacle, or "tent of meeting," where Moses and God would speak "as one speaks to a friend."

God promises to lead His people, and, in an unprecedented event, allows Moses to catch a glimpse of God Himself. God refashions two more tablets for the commandments. He makes a covenant with Moses and the people, creating the rituals of sacrifice that would set apart, or make holy, God's people before His sight. From then on, the Tabernacle was not just a place of atonement for the people's sins, but a clear signal of God's presence in Israel's journey toward the Promised Land.

The story of Chapter 5 is truly astonishing. God had proven faithful to preserve His people and keep His promises, despite a series of dysfunctional families, inter-

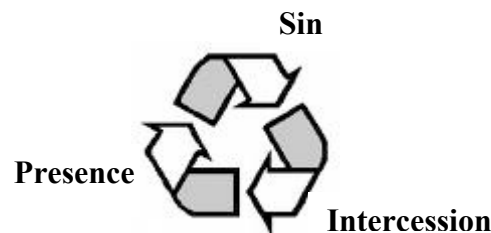
generational battles, years of famine, and now foreign captivity. The message of Chapter 5 is this: You are different—act like it.

You have been rescued! Great miracles accompanied your salvation to ensure you knew this was of God. The cost to your captors was enormous, and the price paid for your freedom was *staggering*. Now, the God who delivered you calls you to a higher purpose. You have been chosen to be the vehicles of his revelation. Upon you rests an honor and a responsibility no one else holds. What a commission!

Are they up to it? Will they pick up this mantle of privilege and carry it forth?

No, they will not. In fact, not only will they deny this trust, they will set a precedent. They will inaugurate a cycle—a pattern—a three-stage template that will be repeated again and again throughout the history of God's chosen people: first Israel, and then the Church.

Phase #1 on your diagram is *sin*:



1. The gravitational force of *sin*.

God's deliverance of His people was astonishing. Supernatural plagues. Miraculous rescue through the Red Sea. A cloud by day. A pillar of fire by night. Water from the rock. Bread from heaven. Freedom.

No sooner has God given these blessings to His children, than their patience wore thin and they fell into disobedience, starting at the very top of the Ten Commandments and flaunting rule #1: "You shall have no other gods before me." They choose an artificial image of their own making over God, flaunting rule #2: Do not make yourself idols of any kind.

I am surely not the only parent in the room who has uttered the words, "What did I just say?" You spend time explaining the rules, that you don't hit girls, you don't touch hot stoves, you don't bathe the cat...and then five minutes later you turn around, see what they're doing, and you're like: "What did I just say?"

The words of God had not stopped echoing on the mountain. The dust had not yet settled from carving the tablets. Moses' knees had not stopped shaking, and there they are, dancing around an idol. Surely, God must have hit His forehead, closed His eyes, and said, "What did I just say?"

The gravitational force of sin is something that each of us must reckon with. The Apostle Paul did his own dance around a golden calf:

The trouble is not with the law but with me, because I am sold into slavery, with sin as my master. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong...But I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things.

Romans 7:14-17

Things haven't changed when it comes to the effects of sin. And if you don't think so, listen to Aaron when Moses confronted him about the golden calf. He was caught red-handed, and this was his response:

Aaron answered, "Don't be angry, master. You know that these people are always ready to do wrong. The people said to me, 'Moses led us out of Egypt, but we don't know what has happened to him. Make us gods who will lead us.' So I told the people, 'Take off your gold jewelry.' When they gave me the gold, I threw it into the fire and out came this calf!"

Exodus 32:22-25

Did you hear what Aaron said? He gave Moses the same excuses we use today when we try to diffuse mistakes or deflect bad choices:

- a. "You know how it is..."
- b. "What have you done for me lately?"
- c. "Well how did that happen??"

Our first point today is that the nature and effects of sin never change—its gravitational force pulls us away from God and if we're not careful, our sin nature wreaks havoc in our lives and the lives of those around us.

2. The second phase to fill in on the cycle is intercession.

Last week we saw God give the whole thing away when He told the story of Moses, as a very clear forerunner of Christ. This week, we see the parallels between him and Jesus even more clearly:

- Moses was the intermediary that brought the will of God down from Sinai—after 40 days alone with God.
- After their disobedience, he fills this ambassadorial role by passionately interceding for Israel and reminding God of his oaths, just as Jesus did in the entire 17th chapter of John's Gospel.
- Then after he destroys the golden calf, Moses goes back to the Lord and, in a third messianic act, intercedes again by offering himself to be "blotted out of the book you have written."

While you and I must lay claim to our point #1 today, that the attractive force of sin has captured all of us, I'm here to encourage you that we must also lay claim to the second point as well: Just as Moses interceded for his people, pled their case, and offered himself, you and I must be intercessors for our families.

And there's your Equipping Point for this week:

To lead your family spiritually, be an intercessor.

How? Let's listen to Webster: "*to act or interpose in behalf of someone in difficulty or trouble, by petition; to attempt to reconcile differences between two people; to plead on another's behalf.*"

Want to lead your family well? Like Moses, be an intercessor. What snippets of your day could be devoted to interceding for your family? Even on the way home—what would five minutes of prayer on the way home do for your mindset when you walked in the door?

Do like Moses:

- Spend a lot of time with God, and then share with your family what you sense from Him.
- When your children sin, remind God of his promises of mercy and grace to all of His children, including yours.
- Offer yourself to God and ask Him to change **you**, before you ask Him to do a number on your wife.

As the spiritual leader of your family, just as Moses was the spiritual leader of Israel, **you** are to be an intercessor.

The last phase of the cycle is the best. After we sin, after Christ our intercessor has taken our punishment and our place, God leaves a magnificent gift:

3. **The gift of His presence.**

After God relents and forgives the people, a tent of meeting, or Tabernacle, is constructed where the Lord would be seen and heard. This tabernacle would lead them, show them the way, and represent God's presence among them. This was God's promise in establishing the tabernacle:

My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.

Exodus 33:14

This is echoed again in Matthew's account, where Jesus invites all into His presence—one of my favorite verses in the Bible:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

The gift of the presence of God in the structure of the Tabernacle, has now become Immanuel, God with us.

Just as the tent of meeting ushers in the actual presence of God among His people, we begin to see a permanent, eternal template being established that points clearly 1,500

years hence: the problem of sin, an Intercessor who, with a radiant face on a mountain, descends to usher in not a set of laws but a Kingdom of grace, by taking the people's sins Himself.

And as Moses the Intercessor led the people through their wanderings until they reached home, so our Intercessor, the Holy Spirit, does the same today: guide us until we finally reach home.

And so, here's the thing: the tent is still there, the tabernacle still stands, but it is transformed: it is no longer a structure made with hands, but something much more: by the Holy Spirit's residence, **we** are now the Tent of Meeting—God living in, and talking to, us. The cloud has become a voice within, so that...

Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.

Isaiah 30:21

Such is the great grace of the Almighty: a God who doesn't just hand down edicts, but extends His own hand. Because it's not just about restrictions; it's about redemption. It's not about going **to** church, it's about **being** church. Because God Himself has pitched his tent within you.

[Intercessory prayer for our families]

Chapter 6: Freedom vs. Familiarity

Two great confrontations between God and man

A. Confronting our preference for the _____.

As much as we want freedom, we want _____ more.

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast- the breaker and destroyer of images...Jesus is the supreme example; he leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.”

—C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

When you're ready to tackle the familiar, to get healthy:

It will get _____ before it gets _____.

Today's Equipping Point

Never leave a legacy of _____

Jesus said to another man, “Follow me!” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the people who are dead bury their own dead. You must go and tell about the kingdom of God.” Another man said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus said, “Anyone who begins to plow a field but keeps looking back is of no use in the kingdom of God.”

Luke 9:59-62

B. God confronts our notions of _____.

Six key leadership principles directly from the staff of Moses:

1. As a leader, _____ is not your responsibility.
2. Lead in the _____ God gives you.

3. Let God do the _____.
4. The conventional wisdom of a leadership community is often _____.
5. In a leadership role, God's _____ go way up.
6. Moses saw the absolute necessity of _____.

Discussion Questions

1. Were you left a backpack or a trunk?
2. What can you do specifically to combat a legacy of fear?
3. Which of these six leadership principles challenge you the most?

Teaching Script

Well, here we are...free at last. Delivered from Egypt and on our own.

God's deliverance of His people was astonishing. Supernatural plagues. Miraculous rescue through the Red Sea. A cloud by day. A pillar of fire by night. Water from the rock. Bread from heaven. Freedom.

God's people had known *about* God, but now they knew *Him*, and they weren't sure they liked what they saw. He wanted them to be more free than they wanted to be. They wanted their situation to change, but God had turned His attention toward changing them.

And isn't that the way it always is? We shop for the kind of God we prefer...the vending machine or divine ATM that gives us just what we ask for, the thing we want most. But God requires us to come to Him on His terms, to give us not what we want but precisely what we need. It's always an uneasy relationship between a God whose terms are non-negotiable and a people who stubbornly try to dictate those terms anyway.

In Chapter 6 of *The Story*, God's plan was clear: deliver His people through a series of miracles, defeat their enemies, give them a covenant and set of laws to make them a chosen nation, and provide them a land of promise. Simple, right? God speaks, the people listen. God delivers, the people believe. God provides, the people trust. Well, maybe not so much.

God always held up His end of the bargain: He always provided, always delivered, always kept His promises. It turns out the people were equally consistent: They always forgot, always questioned, always rebelled. Their lack-of-faith list was long. When daily bread fell from heaven, they craved a taste of Egypt. Even Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron, grew jealous and undermined their brother's leadership.

Then they reached Kadesh, and Moses sent twelve leaders to spy out the Promised Land of Canaan. Ten of the twelve said the cities were too strong, the people too big and God was too small. Only two, Caleb and Joshua, trusted God. They encouraged Israel to go and take what God had given them, but the people complained and failed to believe.

In fact, while evaluating the land, four times they wanted to go back (pp. 71, top 72, lower 72, top 76).

This short-term memory loss was not due to a senior moment. Not like story of the couple in their nineties who visited doctor who told them to start writing things down. So, the next morning, the husband is wandering around the kitchen, and finally he gets out a piece of paper and writes down, "Where's my toast?"

Failure always begins with unbelief. The journey that could have taken 11 days from deliverance to the Promised Land instead took 40 years. They spent that time wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. All those without faith would die out before they set foot on the other side of the land of promise. Only Caleb and Joshua would eventually cross over into their inheritance.

Forty years later, the story comes full circle again to Kadesh, the edge of the promised frontier—and little had changed. The people needed water, so they did what they do

best...they complained. And God did what He does best...He provided. The LORD pointed Moses to a rock. He told him to speak to the rock and water would pour out. Moses struck it with his staff instead. The water still gushed out, but Moses and Aaron had ignored God's instruction and lost their right of admission to the Promised Land.

Moses then commissioned Joshua as Israel's new leader before giving his farewell address. He reminded them of all that the LORD had done. He told them again about their special role as His chosen nation and how they would enjoy His blessings if they would simply love and obey Him. Then Moses died and was buried by the LORD.

The wilderness wanderings remind us that faith leads to life and unbelief leads to death.

In Chapter 6 of *The Story*, this tug-of-war between God and His people is relentless; and we see the true nature of Israel, as well as ourselves. It turns out their struggle mirrors ours to a "T". And we learn something very interesting about human nature.

In this chapter we see at least two great confrontations between God and man. The first one is this:

A. Confronting our preference for the familiar.

Reading Chapter 6, we discover the sad fact that Pharaoh's grip on his nation of slaves wasn't nearly as tight as the Hebrews' desire for the status quo. They wanted God to fix their problem without messing with their paradigm. God's people would have chosen *familiarity over freedom*, but God would have none of that.

Israel had cried out for centuries, asking this God of their fathers to rescue them. The problem was, when He actually showed up, He was not what they'd expected. The sad truth was the whips of the taskmasters were no match for the shackles to which God's chosen people had fastened themselves.

They traded a golden opportunity for a golden calf. They doubted that God could really measure up, so they weighed out their gold, melted it down, and made it into a god they could see and touch. And party with. And feel good about. An image of their own making. Their stand-in god suited them just fine. It wouldn't descend on mountaintops in fire and smoke. It didn't make their knees weak or their hands tremble. Their god of gold wouldn't talk out loud or go beyond their boundaries of the predictable. They wanted a god they could control, a "preferred" god that never made them feel uncomfortable.

And guess what? As we see through the present day, nothing really changes. I would much prefer that God fix my problem without messing with my paradigm. Today we have built deities of affluence, power, adulation, busyness, and addiction. As much as we want freedom, we want familiarity more.

We talked about this last year in our character studies of Nicodemus, Jonah, and Hosea. God is a God of *discomfort*, who cares far more about holiness than happiness. Who would never enable dysfunctional behavior, or tolerate it, but who instead would act more like a potter with a hardened, rocky lump of clay that has to be pounded, doused, swallowed by a fish—whatever it takes.

“My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast- the breaker and destroyer of images...Jesus is the supreme example; he leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.”

—C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

I just got a new pair of running shoes....

Why do people wear shoes that don't fit? Because they've become accustomed to them. Why do people return to the same lifeless job day after day? Because “the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.” Why do so many women leave and then return to abusive husbands? Because it's what they know.

I can't tell you how many people I've talked to that are afraid of freedom for precisely this reason: when you're ready to tackle the familiar, to get healthy:

It will get worse before it gets better. Before you can get sober you've got to detox. Before the cut will heal, the Bactine will sting. It will get worse before it gets better.

It was safer and more predictable to be slaves than face the uncertainties of freedom. In fact, we learn that the faithless generation who were too afraid to take the Promised Land, who were too chicken to trust Joshua and Caleb, passed their fear on to their children. Talk about leaving a lot of baggage...The Bible says only Joshua and Caleb would survive those 40 years of wandering, but after the 40 years had passed, someone was still whining about returning to Egypt! Who could this be but the children of those who whined 40 years ago?? Look at pages 78 and 80 of *The Story*....

All the survivors of Egypt had died off...the only people who could be saying this were the children of those delivered from Egypt. This has to be one of the saddest chapters in the Bible, because those parents left fear as their inheritance.

This leads us to today's Equipping Point:

**To lead your family well, to lead your family spiritually...
*Never leave a legacy of fear.***

Familiarity is the enemy of freedom—and we must have the courage to first lay aside our own baggage, our own resentments and bitterness, before we can fulfill our call to lead our families to health and freedom. Israel left an inheritance of doubt so that their children became convinced they were defeated before they even got started!

Some of us have a backpack and some of us have a trunk, but we all have baggage. And your job as the mentors of the next generation is to take a lesson from these sad, paranoid people who left a legacy of fear and *stop passing on your insecurities to your children.*

Listen to the words of Jesus about pressing on to what is ahead:

Jesus said to another man, "Follow me!" But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the people who are dead bury their own dead. You must go and tell about the kingdom of God." Another man said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go and say good-bye to my family." Jesus said, "Anyone who begins to plow a field but keeps looking back is of no use in the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:59-62

The problem was that they wanted to tend to a life they were supposed to have left behind. They were tending to past issues from an old life. What happens when you start to plow a field and look back? You plow a crooked field. And the greatest disservice we can do to our kids is burdening them with our baggage.

Jesus said focus on where you're going, not where you've been. A godly leader will lead where it's uncomfortable, for the sake of healing. A godly leader does not put his hand to the plow and look back. A godly leader refuses to let his past define him.

God first confronts our preference for the known, the familiar, the comfortable, the manageable. Our freedom requires us to grapple with our demons, because that freedom came at so great a cost.

Second:

B. God confronts our notions of leadership.

In my professional and pastoral career, I've read dozens of books on leadership...the nature of great leadership, the difference between leadership and management, etc.

But in the account of Moses and his leadership of a ragtag band of ungrateful whiners, I think we see six key lessons of leadership that every single one of us either have confronted or will confront at some point in our lives.

You know it's easy to lead a bunch of people who agree with you. It's easy to lead people in an autocratic, dictatorial way where every challenge to your leadership is solved by expulsion or worse. It's easy to lead people when everything is going well and times are prosperous.

But let's take a poll: Anyone here ever try to lead a group of people who constantly questioned your authority? (*show of hands*)

Anyone here ever try to lead a group of volunteers who aren't motivated by a paycheck? (*show of hands*)

Anyone here ever try to lead a group of people through a time of chaos, uncertainty, or outright panic? (*show of hands*)

Then our chapter today is for you. **Here are six key leadership principles directly from the staff of Moses:**

1. As a leader, justice is not your responsibility.

Moses predictably gets fed up with the whining, fussing, and griping of the people. If this is my burden, just kill me, he says. But lesson #1 for leaders is that even when

you reach exasperation trying to “herd cats on linoleum,” trust that a) God gets no less fed up but never fails to apply mercy and b) He will often allow the consequences of the people’s misery to be visited upon them. Look at page 73 of *The Story*... (until it comes out of their nostrils.)

These people became their own punishment. God took care of that and will always do so. That way, you as a leader, can take justice off your plate and focus on *mercy* to the ones you lead.

2. Lead in the role God gives you.

Lesson #2 on leadership is about leading in the role God gives you. Aaron and Miriam were leaders, but did not have Moses’ mantle. Most of us will not be CEO. In fact, most of us will not be called to the leadership position we think we should occupy. In our chapter today, Aaron and Miriam begin to sound a lot like James, John, and their mother in the New Testament: “What about us?” Lesson #2 on leadership is to bloom where God plants you.

3. Let God do the defending.

Leadership Lesson #3 is contained in the same story: let God do the defending. Moses’ humility was the key, and as far as Scripture records, he let God do all the talking—in fact, p. 73 says after the Lord heard Miriam and Aaron, “at once” the Lord jumped in the fray. We must focus on humility and leave the defense to God. The insecurity of many leaders immediately requires them to defend themselves and justify actions they have deemed right. But a leader who is led by the voice of God need not mount a defense—he or she can focus on humility because God is calling the shots.

4. The conventional wisdom of a leadership community is often wrong.

It’s important to remember that the 12 spies were leaders from each tribe. These leaders were called together to collaboratively assess a situation and plan a course of action. But ten of them responded in fear and only two in faith. The “road less traveled”—an out-of-the-box approach—is especially applicable to those who have the responsibility of leading others. If the rest of the world is selling, you might want to think about buying. If the conventional wisdom is doubt, consider faith as your response. Good leaders don’t follow the hordes.

5. In a leadership role, God’s expectations go way up.

You’d think Moses’ striking the rock instead of speaking to it could have been explained by exuberance and maybe a little grandstanding...but as the leader of the people, his example sent a message that no other person’s disobedience would—and so he lost the capstone of the journey: crossing the goal line. In the New Testament, Jesus talks about servant leadership and James warns teachers (influencers) as well about the gravity of authority. As this story demonstrates, we dare not take our witness and our example lightly. Because of their responsibility, leaders have a higher standard than others—and if that troubles you, you probably should be a follower.

6. As a final tribute to his humility and leadership ability, Moses saw the absolute necessity of Succession Planning.

Bad leaders build systems that depend on them. Great leaders build self-sustaining systems that are collaborative, so if I'm gone, no one misses a beat.

Real leaders never fail to equip their people to do without them, and so his prayer on p. 83 is especially poignant: *"May the Lord, The God of every human spirit, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."* He knew his work wasn't completed without ensuring sound leadership for his flock after his departure, even in the face of his punishment. No wonder God thought so much of him.

This week, resolve to never leave a legacy of fear, to your subordinates and to your children, by exercising these six lessons of leadership. Follow these principles and you'll start looking a lot like Moses: flawed and imperfect, but a spiritual leader that moves your family and your marketplace closer to the heart of God.

[Prayer]

Help us to break free of the familiar, the unhealthy—release us from our sin nature. We now see what Jesus meant about dying to self—the seed that falls to the ground and dies—because that fear-based nature must die before we are truly free.

Teach us about real leadership—there are so many bad examples today.

- *Help us to focus on mercy and leave judgment to you*
- *At same time, help us leave the defending to you as well*
- *Make us iconoclasts like Jesus, who break the mold of leadership and take the road less traveled*
- *Raise the standards we expect of ourselves that no one is led astray by our sin*
- *Raise leaders behind us to carry on your work*

The Story: Men's Bible Study Lesson Guide

Chapter 7: The Battle Begins

Men, Rules, and Challenges

Men love _____

God not only gives Joshua the rules, He gives him the _____ to stay within the rules

Today's Equipping Point:

Be a man of God's _____, a man of _____, and a man _____ with God

1. A man of God's Word

The Story Page 89

He said, *"Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave to you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."*

2. A Man of Prayer

"So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land."

Our lesson here is to _____ to God

3. Be a man identified with God

Matthew 5:16 says, *"...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*

Joshua 24:14-15

"Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But, if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Discussion Questions

1. Which of these is your weakest link: God's Word, prayer, identity with God?
2. Have you decided whom you and your household will serve? Discuss what that means.
3. Are you ready to answer God's "MEN WANTED" ad? Discuss your answer.

The Story Men's Group
By Chris Van Brocklin
Mountain Christian Church, Joppa, MD
October, 2013

Chapter 7: The Battle Begins

NOTE: The Men's Group at Oak Hills Church did not meet during Week 7, so there is not a lesson from Brad Tuggle written for that week. This lesson was written in 2013 by the men's Bible study leader at Mountain Christian Church, and thoughtfully shared for the benefit of all the Story churches!

7:00-7:05 Youth Video (3:00)

7:05-7:10 Intro

- Salmon
 - Have you ever watched a documentary on TV or even personally witnessed how salmon swim upstream to spawn?
 - It's quite fascinating
 - In the 1960s and early 1970's New York State and Canada collaborated to bring salmon fishing back into the Great Lakes region
 - I grew up in Central New York State and had the experience of fishing for some of the first returning schools of salmon to the Salmon River on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario
 - It was an amazing sight to see these huge fish swimming with all of their might against strong current
 - They literally launch themselves up waterfalls and over jagged rocks in the shallows where you can get a good look at their struggle
 - An irresistible force drives them upward and onward despite the barriers along the way
 - It's inspiring to watch
 - But, some of the salmon get tired
 - In their exhaustion, they stop swimming and immediately are swept back downstream
 - The current gets the best of them and they give up
 - Following God's will in this world can be a lot like being a salmon swimming upstream
 - God calls us to fight against the cultural current every day
 - It's a battle, a war, and a daily challenge to keep living for God in a world where there is a strong current opposing God's will and ways
 - We have a choice
 - Swim with all your might and keep fighting the pressure to conform
 - Or, give up and find ourselves floating back downstream into the habits and practices that were a part of your story before you became a follower
 - I wake up every day determined to follow God's will, but so often the current of political correctness or expediency overcome my willingness to press on

- Can you think of a time in your life when you were faced with an overwhelming challenge that you needed to confront?
 - What was it?
 - How did you respond?

- Review

- In chapter 6 of *The Story*, God's plan was clear:
 - Deliver His people through a series of miracles
 - Defeat their enemies
 - Give them a covenant and a set of laws to make them a chosen nation
 - And, provide them a land of promise
 - Simple right?
 - God speaks...the people listen...God delivers...the people believe
 - God provides...the people trust
 - Not so much!
 - Over and over, the nation of Israel waffles between following God and disobeying God
 - God gave them the rules, they agreed to follow them, God blesses them, but they turn away from Him
 - That's pretty much the pattern that began in the Garden and has been the theme of this story ever since
 - In Chapter 7, we are going to get a break from the pattern (thankfully) and see what happens when one man and his household choose to follow the Lord
- Let's watch the Chapter 7 video to see what happens next

7:15-7:25 Adult Video (10:00)

7:25-7:50 Teaching Script

- Men, Rules, and Challenges

- In Chapter 6, we read about Moses receiving the 10 commandments from God and delivering them to the people
 - Of all people, we men should love the fact that God provides us with the rules
 - Men don't do well without rules
 - In fact, they did a study a few years ago to see how road construction affects drivers
 - They found that when they set up shoulder cones or cement barriers, especially on each side of the highway, women tend to slow down, but men actually speed up!
 - When men leave the construction zone and drive beyond the barriers, they actually slow down again...women speed back up!
 - **Men love rules** (boundaries)
 - I heard this past week that the NFL has taken over as America's favorite pastime
 - You remember that baseball has been America's favorite pastime up until now
 - The Monday night football game between the Vikings and the Giants, not exactly the best teams in the NFL, drew a larger viewing audience than the first game of this year's World Series game between St. Louis and Boston
 - The conclusion, I guess, is that the NFL must have taken over as the most popular sport in America!
 - Men love baseball and football...why is that?
 - Could it be that both sports are full of rules?

- But there are some differences between baseball and football...check this out...
- Play George Carlin's spoof on the difference between baseball and football <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alkqNiBASfl>
- Chapter 7 begins with God reviewing the rules with Joshua
 - He repeats His promises and promises that He made to Moses (Pages 89-90)
 - No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life
 - I will never leave you or forsake you
 - Be strong and very courageous
 - As men, we should love this part of *The Story*
- It reminds me of a newspaper ad that appeared in the London Times on December 29, 1913 that read:
 - MEN WANTED: for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.
 - In 1914, Irish born Ernest Shackleton set out for his second of four attempts to cross Antarctica.
 - This is how he advertised in order to find men for his crew.
 - Some interesting trivia?
 - Unfortunately, the ship ("Endurance") became trapped in sea ice
 - The men were forced to trek their way on foot, and later, in lifeboats
 - An endeavor that cost them about two years
 - In an era littered with accounts of serious injuries and death on Antarctic expeditions, the fate of Shackleton's men is remarkable: Not a single man died
 - Sadly, Ernest Shackleton never managed to cross the South Pole in his lifetime
 - But he is known until today as a charismatic leader and a world-renowned adventurer.
 - By the way, Shackleton received 5000 applications that responded to the ad!
- You see, **men not only love rules, they also love challenges**
 - That's what God is doing here, challenging Joshua to lead His people into the long-awaited Promised Land
 - We have a "promised land" today that God is challenging us to
 - It's leading a godly life amidst a decaying culture
 - That means running away from anything that lets God down; pornography, addictions, isolation, anger, etc.
 - Perhaps you need to set up some rules for yourself
 - It's leading your family by being the spiritual pursuer for your wife and kids
 - Be the one to read scripture and kneel in prayer
 - Be the one to get up on Sunday morning (or shut the game off on Saturday afternoon) and get the family to church
 - Be the one to reach out to a widow or single parent to lend a hand
 - It's working every day in integrity and being recognized as someone swimming upstream against the current in the marketplace
 - Work "as unto the Lord" not your boss or anyone else
 - Lean into your workplace relationships with care and understanding for a fellow worker

- God's promises are still good today for you and me
 - No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life
 - I will never leave you or forsake you
 - Be strong and very courageous
- **God not only gives Joshua the rules, He gives him the strategies to stay within the rules**
 - This leads us to this week's **Equipping Point:**
Be a man of God's Word, a man of prayer, and a man identified with God
 - 1. A man of God's Word
 - When the fathers of Israel, along with their families, finally crossed over into the promised land, they crossed on dry land
 - What's the big deal about that?
 - The big deal is that they walked on dry land that only seconds before had been a raging roaring river (here's some more trivia)
 - It was cresting above flood stage
 - It was a mile wide
 - It was 150 feet deep
 - In an instant, as soon as the priest's foot touched the water, the Jordan River rolled itself back
 - It obeyed its Creator
 - Not a drop of water remained
 - Sound familiar?
 - You see, when God encouraged Joshua to lead the nation of Israel into the promised land, their first barrier was the Jordan River
 - But, Joshua was a man of God's Word and from it he had evidence that God was good at drying things up so that people could cross over
 - God told Joshua that He was going to do this
 - 40 years before, He rolled back the Red Sea for Moses
 - Now He was going to do it again at the Jordan River to validate Joshua's leadership as Moses' successor
 - When you study God's Word and have experience with how He works, nothing is impossible!
 - But, you must listen to what God told Joshua here at the bottom of Page 89
 - He said, ***"Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave to you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."***
 - Want to be prosperous and successful?
 - Be a man of God's Word
 - Obey God's Word
 - 2. A Man of Prayer
 - Through Joshua, we see prayer a little differently
 - God told Joshua not to go into battle without first listening to Him
 - When they conquered Jericho, it was a direct result of listening to all of God's instructions, and then carrying them out

- Hasn't it seemed a little ridiculous to you that the army marched around the city walls for 6 days and then on the seventh day gave a shout and the walls came tumbling down?
 - That was God testing Israel to see if they were listening to Him
 - They were and He gave them the victory
 - At the top of Page 94, it says, ***"So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land."***
- However, God had told Joshua and the Israelites that the spoil of war was His alone
 - Everyone obeyed, except one man; Achan
 - The results were different this time
 - Israel was defeated when they attacked Ai
 - Israel repented and Achan was killed for not listening
 - God encouraged them and they listened and defeated Ai on their second try
- Our lesson here is to **listen to God**
 - I think that more often than not, our understanding of prayer is that it's about us talking to God
 - Probably because you can hear yourself talk, but you can't audibly hear God
 - God spoke audibly to Joshua (we surmise), but He doesn't speak audibly to us, so we don't think that listening (like we're used to listening) works
 - We fill the silence with our own voices
 - Perhaps it would be better to "be still and know that I am God" is valuable
 - Listening to God is more observing God and looking for how He answers through His word, other godly people, or circumstances
 - So, train yourself to be a good listener by being an astute observer
- 3. Be a man identified with God
 - Joshua was a man set apart by God to lead the nation He was building by doing great things
 - *The Story* says that he lived to be 110 years old
 - It says that the sun stopped in the middle of the day so that God could listen to him
 - By the end of his life, Joshua had subdued the whole region and left no survivors just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded
 - Joshua left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses
 - Joshua took the entire land
 - You and I can get lost in the fact that we probably won't lead a nation or a military campaign...that was Joshua's job
 - But, we are set apart nonetheless
 - Our job is to reflect what God has done in our lives to those around us and lead others to conclude that it is God working through us
 - Matthew 5:16 says, *"...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*
 - If you're a family man, lead your family in such a way that people around you see your family and give your Father in heaven the glory
 - If you run a company, carry out business in such a way that people around you see you're your business and give your Father in heaven the glory

- If you drive a truck, do it in such a way that people around you see how you treat other drivers and give your Father in heaven the glory
 - If you're in sales, do it in such a way that people around you see how you treat customers and give your Father in heaven the glory
 - You and I (if you are a Christ follower) are set apart too
 - Be a man whose actions say, here is a man who is following God...I want to know that man because I want to know God
- Conclusion
 - At the end of Joshua's life, Joshua went over God's laws and promises with the people once again
 - In Chapter 24:14-15, he says:

"Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But, if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."
 - Israel responded by pledging to follow the Lord
 - The charge for all of us today is to choose for ourselves who we will serve
 - If you choose to serve the Lord, then this week, resolve to be a man of God's Word, a man of Prayer, and a man identified with God
 - Rise to the challenges that are in front of you no matter how overwhelming they may seem today
 - God was bigger than the giants of Canaan
 - He is bigger than any giants in our way
 - What if you ran across this ad in the newspaper today?
MEN WANTED: for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.
 - God's Word has a similar challenge
MEN WANTED: to lead godly lives. No wages, sometimes hot and sometimes cold, long months in what seems to be the darkness, constant opposition from the culture. Safe return guaranteed. Honor and recognition from the words, "Well done good and faithful servant". Life everlasting.
 - And, it has this at the end; "Contact your Father in heaven"
 - The battle begins today, who's going to sign up?
 - Chapter 7 has many lessons for us as men
 - Use the discussion questions at the end of your notes to process what we are learning in this part of *The Story*

7:50-8:25

Group Discussion

8:25-8:30

Announcements and Prayer

Chapter 8: The Call vs. The Culture

The call vs. the culture: a never-ending battle between being different (set apart) and being the same as everybody else.

Two different ways God provided through two very different judges:

A. He helped a leader in _____.

How could a whole generation could grow up after Joshua and “know neither the Lord nor what He did for Israel?” Because the culture is _____.

“This dream can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon... God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands!”

Judges 7:14

B. He defeated a leader in his _____.

1. No strength you have is ever enough to make up for your _____.
2. People _____ have no need of God's power.
3. If your strength is not consecrated to God, it becomes your _____.

Today's Equipping Point

_____ **your gift**

Offer your greatest talent to God. How?

- _____ for the times you've used your gift sinfully.
- _____ before exercising it.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Matthew 5:5

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John...

Luke 5:4-10

Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32-34

Paraphrase:

"How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Tom, Bruce, Rodney, Rick, Pete, and _____. By faith these men overthrew Satan's influence, led their families with grace, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of naysayers, quenched the fires of doubt, and escaped death through the blood of Jesus. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies of the Enemy to flight."

Discussion Questions

1. What part of our culture has been the sneakiest in your life?
2. Why do you think God was so gracious to give so many confirmations to Gideon?
3. No false modesty here:
 - a. What is your greatest gift?
 - b. Now how will you consecrate that strength to God?

Teaching Script

A few years ago psychologist Ruth W. Berenda and her associates carried out an interesting experiment with teenagers designed to show how a person handled group pressure. The plan was simple. They brought groups of ten adolescents into a room for a test. Subsequently, each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line.

Regardless of the instructions they heard, once they were all together in the group, the nine were not to vote for the longest line, but rather vote for the next to the longest line. The experiment began with nine teen-agers voting for the wrong line. The stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and slip his hand up with the group. The instructions were repeated and the next card was raised. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there saying a short line is longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about 75% of the cases, and was true of small children and high-school students alike.

Anyone ever felt peer pressure? Anyone's kid ever tell you about peer pressure? Did your parents ever tell you, "How many times have I told you...stay away from them. That's the wrong crowd. They are dangerous...uh huh...yeah...so if they told you to jump off a bridge, would you do that too?"

Now the real question: How many times have YOU as a parent said those exact words again? After you swore you'd never talk like your mom and dad, how many times have you said, "Well, if they told you to jump off a bridge..." and then just stopped in horror. Oh my goodness, I can't believe I just said that....

But guess what? The problem of orthodoxy and congruity and compliance is as bad as it ever was.

It's the constant lure to conform, to blend in, to be accepted, to not be labeled a loser, a chicken, gutless, a nerd, a dork, a schlemiel, a dweeb, a goober, a moron, or any combination of four-letter expletives. Take your pick of adjectives.

This is the message today: the call vs. the culture: a never-ending battle between being different, set apart, and the same as everybody else. We've heard this before. This was the message of chapter five three weeks ago: be different! I've rescued you for a purpose: you were saved to bear God's image to the world. You were spared to be salt and light. You are to be the instrument to reach the Gentiles as well. But what happened? They danced around an idol and God must've had this huge knot on His forehead from hitting the wall and lamenting, "What did I just say??"

And guess what? It happened again! They entered the Promised Land, won amazing victories, saw God rout their enemies, and then, it happened again! Those pagan neighbors they failed to eradicate became a toxic influence on a nation called to be different. They caved—they became indistinguishable from their neighbors.

We dealt with this two years ago when we studied Proverbs 9. Remember, there were two voices speaking: Wisdom and Folly. One says wise up, be different, live up to your calling. The other says “Stolen water is sweet...Come home with me!” And you might remember that if we give in, if we don’t choose well, we do what? We leave our buttpoints in the sand. Talk to me later if you don’t know what that means.

Let’s look at this roller-coaster chapter of ups and downs and draw lessons as we walk through. First, let’s look at the middle of page 103 [*read the first four sentences of paragraph 3*].

Now how was this possible? ONE generation passed, and both God and what He had done were foreign concepts. You’ve heard about how important it is to build into and equip your kids because, as many have said, “the church is one generation away from extinction.” This is not an exaggeration—this is not an overly dramatic preacher trying to make a point. This is history! It happened! And right after the conquest of the Promised Land!

Let’s read on [*read the next two sentences, ending with “able to resist”*].

This is why God had Joshua cleanse the land so thoroughly as he marched through. This is why the flood wiped out everything—so God could give His people the best chance possible of hearing Him well and building enough character to resist the lure of the culture. And it’s why church is so important today, and why gatherings like this are **crucial**. If you and I don’t come and gear up, re-arm for the fight, make sure we have each other’s “six” and fuel up for the journey, we are sitting ducks in the culture war over our souls.

But we see in Chapter 8 that this was the lot of the Hebrews: a vertigo-inducing lifestyle that played on their weaknesses. First it was the Moabites and King Eglon, then Jabin the king of the Canaanites. When two courageous women, Deborah and Jael had the guts to take care of business and purge the evil, there were 40 years of peace.

But then some of the worst bullies of the Old Testament, the Midianites, showed up. Look at the bottom half of page 107 [*read the paragraph that starts “The Israelites...”*].

And who did God raise up to save them? A lowly wheat-thresher named Gideon. Today we’re going to look at two different ways God provided through two very different judges—and here’s the first:

A. He helped a leader in doubt.

The first place where we find Gideon is hiding—threshing wheat to keep it from the Midianites.

He then calls him a “mighty warrior.” This would have been one of those Kodak moments to capture the look on Gideon’s face when God said that. It would have been like the look on David Robinson’s face if God appeared to him at the Naval Academy in physics class and said, “The Lord is with you, O Great Builder of Schools.” It would have been like the look on my face if God appeared to me in a dusty warehouse at MCI counting microwave transmitters and said, “The Lord is with you, O Preacher of the Word.” Have you ever heard Bill Cosby’s monologue on Noah?

“Noah?”

“WHAT? Who is that?”

“It’s the Lord, Noah.”

“Right....who is this really?”

“It’s the Lord, Noah. I want you to build me...an ark.”

“Right.”

This was a leader in doubt, who could only see the grain on the floor. God saw a man with a trumpet, a jar, and a torch.

The third thing to notice about Gideon is that he was clueless why this was happening. On page 108, he says, “Pardon me Lord.....given us into the hand of Midian.” Gideon had no concept of how Israel’s apostasy had distanced them from God! And the amazing thing is, God did not take this opportunity to slap him upside the head and say, “What do you mean *if the Lord is with us*? Don’t you get cable down on that threshing floor? What do you mean WHY?”

But God was endlessly patient—He didn’t reprimand or chastise, He just said “Go save Israel.” Once again we see, like a couple of weeks ago, God equips the called. He could have searched for an equipped four-star with a chest full of medals and a sterling track record in a hot zone. Instead, He chose an obedient farmer. God chooses based on different criteria, then He equips at just the right time.

This cluelessness on the part of Gideon is important to see because the culture is sneaky. You can be infected and not even know it. Satan is so masterful at masking a slow descent into sin, you’ll find yourself looking around one day and saying, “How did I get here?”

Video Feature

To illustrate how a generation can grow up not knowing the Lord, show a clip from “Broadcast News:”

The scene takes place after the correspondents’ ball. Albert Brooks is talking to Holly Hunter (she’s all dressed up), trying to convince her that William Hurt is “the devil.” He describes the devil as not coming in a frightening, scary kind of way, but in an unobtrusive way, where he “slowly, inch by inch, lowers our standards, just a little at a time.”

THAT explains how a whole generation could grow up after Joshua and “know neither the Lord nor what He did for Israel.” THAT explains how Gideon could stand there with a straight face and say, “Pardon me Lord, but where have you been?” The culture is stealthy, deceitful, shifty, underhanded, and clandestine.

God was even so gracious that He helped this doubt-filled leader by patiently enduring four tests—four hoops that Gideon wanted him to jump through before he said, “OK, I’m all in.” First the angel incinerated the meat on the rock, then the dew was on the fleece

only, then it was on the ground only, and then he overheard the dream of an enemy that foretold his victory.

And once again, far from throwing His hands up in disgust, or pitching a hissy fit on Gideon's weak faith, He just smiled and said, "OK, now that I've got you convinced, send 99% of your men home." And because of these signs God gave him, Gideon

believed. In an amazing display of His grace, God brought Gideon along *slowly*, demonstrating his power, patiently answering Gideon's questions.

In fact, the transformation in Gideon was so complete, that as he sat outside the enemy's tent, he heard them respond in fear to the name of a hapless farmer: "This dream can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon...God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands!"

The first takeaway for us is that even in a state of doubt and fear, God nurtures us, brings us along at a pace we can handle, but still firmly challenges us to step WAY out of our comfort zone to claim victory. If *you're* a leader in doubt today, about your capabilities or your future, you can rest assured God works through doubting farmers, doubting accountants, doubting sales reps, doubting stockbrokers, doubting real estate agents, and even doubting preachers.

Here was a great victory, but again, it was short-lived. At the top of page 112 it says...

They were in trouble again, and this time God used a different leader and a different method. This time, in point #2 on your outline,

B. He defeated a leader in his *strength*.

You say he did what? God defeated Israel's enemies by using a leader that needed to be defeated himself. A leader whose strength became a source of pride, cockiness and arrogance. A man whose narcissism knew no bounds.

Samson was a Nazirite, consecrated from birth who had never had alcohol or a haircut and kept to a strict diet. He grew up a fearsome man:

- He tore a lion apart with his bare hands
- After his riddle he struck down 30 men
- After his father-in-law gave his wife to another man, he lit the tails of foxes who ran through the fields and burned all the grain
- When those enemies killed his wife and her father, he slaughtered them
- He took the jawbone of a donkey and killed 1,000 more men

He was an intimidating man, but...but...let's just say he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. His first wife nagged him long enough to get the secret of the riddle. Then his second wife, Delilah, a Philistine spy, tried three times unsuccessfully to get him to tell the secret of his great strength. You'd have thought by now Samson would have caught on. You'd have thought he'd run a background check on Delilah and gotten the scoop. You would think just her repeated badgering of him for the secret might have tipped him off just a little. Smell the coffee Samson!

Unfortunately, however, Samson was thinking, shall we say, with the wrong part of his anatomy, so he spilled the beans and the Bible says the Lord left him.

He was blinded, and made a spectacle for the Philistines, who taunted him and used him for sport. But despite his failures over and over, the Spirit of God came upon him in power. His last day was his best day and he took his torturers with him.

The point to see in the story of Samson is this: God defeated a leader in his strength to deliver His people.

Now you might say, why would God do that? Why wouldn't God use a gift that He Himself had given Samson to rescue Israel? It's because of this:

- **No strength you have is ever enough to make up for your weaknesses.**
- **People sure of themselves have no need of God's power.**
- **If your strength is not consecrated to God, it becomes your weakness.**

God gives us gifts to honor Him and serve the Kingdom and the world. If your gift is management, you bless your company by exercising that gift well. If your gift is compassion, you bring glory to God by loving your marketplace and your family. But what happens when we forget the Giver of the gift? What happens when I'm so good at something, I stop honoring the One who gave it to me?

The answer is, I become Samson. This leads us to today's Equipping Point:

Surrender your gift.

Only when our gifts are submitted to the Giver can they be fully utilized for His glory, not ours. This is incredibly difficult, because our strengths are what come to us most naturally; it can never occur to us to surrender the very thing we do most easily. But if you're like me, and like Samson, you've used your greatest gifts, whether it's management, empathy, discernment, or teaching, to elevate yourself.

How do we keep from doing this? How do we offer our strengths, our greatest talents to God?

1. We need to repent for the times we've used our gifts sinfully, or selfishly.
2. We need to pray before exercising it.

If you're particularly talented at counseling, make sure you pray before each session. If you're gifted at the mechanisms of management and building infrastructure, make sure you pray before every meeting, whether at work or on a volunteer committee at church, to ensure your strength doesn't become a stumbling block to yourself or to others.

Now let's look at two Biblical examples of the same principle. The first is in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:5

This is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. Jesus is NOT saying ‘blessed are the milquetoasts...blessed are those with a poor self-image...blessed are the spineless, the wishy-washy, the wusses...’

On the contrary, the word meek has a sense of “strength under control.” A wild animal who is governed and channels its strength for its master—a stallion that isn’t beaten down, but whose great strength, energy and spirit is harnessed for a larger purpose. This was Samson’s problem—he had great strength, but it went to his head and it wasn’t submitted to God.

The second example in the Bible comes from the Gospels.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John...

Luke 5:4-10

It’s important to know that by this time, Jesus had already performed miracles and established His identity. He had turned the water to wine, healed a child there at Cana, healed a demoniac, Peter’s mother-in-law and several others. But it was only when Jesus defeated Peter in his strength—fishing—that he called him Lord. You could perhaps imagine sarcasm in Peter’s voice when he said, “We’ve worked hard all night; but because you say so...” It’s almost as if Peter were saying, “Look, I’m the fisherman, you’re the prophet. You stick to preaching, and let me handle the fishing.”

But when Jesus defeated him in his strength, in his profession, in his giftedness, Peter called him Lord.

I’m wondering if there isn’t someone besides me here today who has been defeated in their strength. Perhaps you have a gift of leadership and haven’t been allowed to exercise that gift where you work. Perhaps you’re a consultant and you can see things from the outside that people on the inside can’t see but....they just won’t listen to you. Maybe you have a real passion to speak into a situation, or to help fix a problem that you KNOW you could solve, but no one will give you permission to deal with that problem. Has anyone ever had these feelings?

If so, congratulations. Because you have joined the ranks of Samson, Peter, Jacob, and a host of other characters whom God defeated in their strength. Why? So we will call him Lord and Master. So we can see that no matter how good we are at something, it will never make up for all the rest. So we don’t get cocky and think WE are somehow God’s gift to humanity or to this church. Because until you take your strength and first offer it to the Lord, it’s YOUR gift, not His.

God graciously helps leaders like Gideon who are full of fear and doubt, and He helps other leaders with amazing abilities by graciously breaking them, and defeating their strength, so that their potency is submitted to God's purposes. Just as a wild stallion

needs to be broken to be of service to its owner, so we need that same "meekness"—power that is restrained, but ready to be released by God's will, in God's timing.

God is never bashful about His intentions for His people. He never tolerates sin and, at the same time, never breaks His covenant with His people. Israel may not have fully understood God's discipline, but over and over He had to bring them to their knees in order to bring them to Himself.

Here is a great quote that sums up the roller-coaster history of Israel in the time of the Judges:

A couple of years ago a friend introduced me to the phrase 'the saw-toothed history of Israel.' Israel was up one day and down the next. One day they were marching in triumph through the Red Sea, singing songs of victory, the next they were grumbling in the desert because they missed having Egyptian steak and potatoes for supper. One day they were marching around Jericho blowing trumpets and raising hearty hymns, and the next they were plunged into an orgy at some Canaanite fertility shrine. One day they're heeding God's voice, the next they're being bullied by the Midianites or the Philistines. One day they are with Jesus in the upper room, listening in rapt attention and receiving his love, the next they are stomping around and cursing in the courtyard, denying they ever knew him.

*But all the time, as we read that saw-toothed history, we realize something solid and steady: they are **always** God's people. God is steadfastly with them, in mercy and judgment, insistently gracious...My security comes from who God is, not from how I feel. Discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about him or myself.*

—Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

In the same way, we, you and I, despite our failures—despite our propensity to be Homer Simpson with that daily "D'oh!"—we are always God's men.

Look at Hebrews 11:

Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32-34

We are stunned to find bargaining Barak, gutless Gideon, self-indulging Samson and the politically-incorrect Jephthah listed in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. Their lives illustrate the great theological truth that the work of the LORD depends not on our

consistency or dependability, but on God's empowerment. How comforting it is to know that God triumphs despite us!

Look back at these verses we just read from Hebrews—will you allow me a personal paraphrase? From the “Revised New Living Century International Convolutd” version:

“How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Tom, Bruce, Rodney, Rick, Pete, and _____ (write in). By faith these people overthrew Satan's influence, led their families with grace, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of naysayers, quenched the fires of doubt, and escaped death through the blood of Jesus. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies of the Enemy to flight.”

There you go. You are officially enrolled in the Hall of Faith; not because of what you did, but because of what God did. You always were, and always will be, His.

Chapter 9: God's Gracious Redemption

Three things to notice about Ruth and Naomi:

- They could not _____.
- They were unable to _____ from their predicament.
- Only through the _____ would they live a life out of bondage.

Naomi's Lower Story:

"The Almighty has left my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me: The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."
Ruth 1:20-21

The Upper Story:

The Kinsman Redeemer: *God's provision for the less fortunate*

- 1) The redeemer must be a near relative to the one redeemed
- 2) The redeemer must be willing to perform the work of redemption
- 3) The redeemer must possess the ability to redeem
- 4) The redeemer must himself be free
- 5) The redeemer must pay the value or price of redemption

Redemption costs the redeemer and is for the benefit of the redeemed.

Jesus—Our Kinsman Redeemer: *God's provision for the poor in spirit*

1) Jesus is a *near kinsman* to mankind because he is fully human.

For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death.

Hebrews 2:14

2) Jesus was willing to perform the work of redemption.

No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily.

John 10:18

3) Jesus alone possessed the ability to redeem because He was sinless.

"You were not redeemed with...precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."

1 Peter 1:17-18

4) Jesus was free because He fulfilled the Law.

"Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them."

Matthew 5:17

5) Jesus offered Himself as the price of redemption.

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:45

6) Like Boaz, Jesus took the Church as His bride. (Eph. 5:25, Rev. 19:7)

Equipping Point

Be your family's _____

- Your family is your responsibility.
- You want to set your family free and provide for them spiritually.
- You are not obligated to do so, you are motivated by love.
- Are you willing to let God cleanse you and set you free, so you can redeem?
- You are charged to be Jesus to your family.
- You have the character to do this.

Quick Takeaways

- 1) God raises up some of the most _____ to accomplish His will.
- 2) God is telegraphing His plan to _____ with the message of Christ. *This message was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to his own holy people. For it has pleased God to tell his people that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory.* Colossians 1:26-7
- 3) God is at work in the lives of the faithful even in the _____.
- 4) We have a responsibility to take care of _____ people.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Like Naomi, did you get caught up in the Lower Story this week? The temporal, difficult conditions we live with every day?
- 2) Like Ruth, what might God be orchestrating in your life at a higher level? An Upper Story?
- 3) How could you or your family demonstrate God's compassion during the holidays this year?

Teaching Script

As we saw last week, the period of the judges wasn't the godliest in Israel's history. This sad period of over 300 years encompassed six different occupations and oppressions by the worst of the Hebrews' sworn enemies. God allowed these calamities to come on His people because, as it says at the end of Judges, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judges 21:25) God's chosen people looked more like a reality show gone wrong than a holy beacon of hope. They had abandoned God's plan over and over and looked more like the Island of Misfit Toys than the hope of the world. The light had gone out on God's people; it was a dark time indeed. Then a foreigner stepped onto the stage and a candle of hope flickered once again.

In the 1964 draft, the Dallas Cowboys picked Mel Renfro on the second pick, Bob Hayes on the 7th, and a guy named Roger Staubach on the 10th. It was a bit of a risk—a guy who still had a Navy commitment to finish, but the Cowboys did it anyway and the rest is history.

In this book, Ruth is the surprise draft pick. After the Israelites had shown their fickleness and disobedience time and time again, God went outside the circle to a Moabite—a Gentile—to continue the line of succession to Jesus. This surprise draft pick was an outsider that would show God's people what faithfulness looks like.

The story of Ruth is a beautiful story that glimmers against a backdrop of blackness. Naomi's family was leaving the Promised Land because famine had left them hungry for food and for hope. They settled in Moab where idol worship was the prevailing ritual and God seemed far away. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But then tragedy struck again: the wedding celebrations were followed quickly by funerals—first Naomi's husband and then her two sons. All that was left was three widows, no children and no prospects. The outlook was grim indeed.

Naomi later heard that the famine had lifted and decided to return to Bethlehem. She sent her daughters-in-law back to their homes where they might find new husbands. Ruth refused to leave, and we first hear her often-quoted declaration of loyalty and commitment: "Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people and your God my God." (p. 122) As Naomi and Ruth traveled home, survival, not prosperity, was the objective. A widow had few rights, and the provisions for them were dictated by God to care for the less fortunate of their society.

One right was the ability to gather leftover grain from the fields. Her field of choice "just happened" to be the farmstead of a godly man named Boaz. He also "happened" to be a family guardian who could carry on the heritage of Naomi's deceased husband and sons. He noticed Ruth from the start and admired the way she worked to provide for her aging mother-in-law, and he offered both his help and protection.

Jewish law required a family guardian to redeem both a widow and her land to preserve the family line. So, as was the custom, Naomi told Ruth to offer herself in marriage to Boaz, and he patiently waited as closer relatives were offered and then declined the opportunity to help. Other than this, there wasn't much in the way of provision for the

poor. For the rest of their lives, Ruth and Naomi would be dependent on the kindness and grace of others.

We need to notice three things at this point about Ruth and Naomi:

- **They could not *save themselves*.**
- **They were unable to *extricate themselves* from their predicament.**
- **Only through the *intervention of another* would they live a life out of bondage.**

Does this sound like a setup or what? Could this be the opening lines in yet another Messianic story that foreshadows a future Redeemer? Now, in Chapter 9 of *The Story*, we can see it coming. We've had so many characters so far that herald a Savior: Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, even Gideon last week—it's starting to sink in that a pattern is emerging here.

Even though the book is named Ruth, and much of the story is about her extraordinary faith and character, the Christ-figure in this story is Boaz. Two months ago as we began *The Story* you might not have been able to identify the name of Boaz as a precursor of Jesus, but now we see him clearly whispering Christ's name and acting as Jesus would 1,000 years hence.

Boaz fills his role as a family guardian or “kinsman redeemer,” and in doing so, becomes the great-grandfather of David and a direct ancestor of the Lord Jesus.

And like Jesus, Boaz may have had a particularly tender heart for outsiders. Jesus seemed to be drawn to the unwanted and unneeded of society in his ministry to the Samaritan woman at the well and the other woman caught in adultery. The Bible says he was a descendent of Rahab the harlot, so perhaps it's not surprising that Boaz had a heart for the stranger, the outcast, the marginalized—just like his Savior would.

Throughout the story of Ruth, we can see God working behind the scenes for the good of His faithful followers. It would be easy to get lost in the Lower Story here: three widows left without provision, a family split, returning home destitute, and Naomi even saying,

The Almighty has left my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me: The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.

Ruth 1:20-21

But we know something is coming...we've seen Joseph, and Abraham, and Gideon: when it looks the darkest, God is still at work. When it seems God has afflicted us, he is working out his perfect will and bringing about an ending we would never imagine.

Look at the concept of the Kinsman Redeemer—God's provision for the less fortunate.

He was to act as God's hands and heart toward the less fortunate within their community. Much of the Law was designed to provide opportunities for Israel to trust God, to be generous like God, to demonstrate the love and the justice of God. God's means to take care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan was through His people.

- **The levirate marriage** was one such custom. When a man died without a son to inherit his land and carry on a family line, his brother was responsible to take the widow as his wife and produce a first-born son who would bear the dead brother's name. The following children born to the widow and her new husband would belong to the new husband and bear his name, since the widows had very little means of providing for themselves.
- **Redemption of property** was another responsibility of the kinsman redeemer. If someone became poor and was therefore compelled to sell off his or her land to survive, then a kinsman redeemer was obligated to buy it back, or redeem it, for the poor person.

For someone to qualify as a **kinsman redeemer**, J. Vernon McGee suggests at least 5 criteria must be met:

- 1) The redeemer must be a near kinsman (relative) to the one redeemed
- 2) The redeemer must be willing to perform the work of redemption
- 3) The redeemer must possess the ability to redeem
- 4) The redeemer must himself be free
- 5) The redeemer must pay the value or price of redemption

These were God's provision for the less fortunate.

The key is this: **Redemption costs the redeemer and is for the benefit of the redeemed.** The kinsman redeemer was called upon to give of his own resources to benefit others. He used his money to redeem property for someone else because he understood that all belonged to God anyway. The redeemer is acting in gracious, loyal lovingkindness toward the redeemed—he is acting like God!

So let's look at Boaz, the Kinsman Redeemer:

- 1) Boaz was a near kinsman to Naomi and Ruth.
- 2) Boaz was willing to perform the work of redemption, but a closer relative was not. That Boaz still wanted to serve as the kinsman redeemer without being obligated by law demonstrates even further his godliness.
- 3) Boaz had the *ability*—the financial means—to be a kinsman redeemer. He was clearly a very successful businessman and farmer. He had servants who respected him.
- 4) Boaz was free and therefore able to redeem. His land and his possessions weren't under obligation to another. Israel had been through a very long drought period (at least the 10 years Naomi was in Moab). It was not uncommon to sell oneself as a slave due to poverty (Lev. 25:39) but such was not the case for Boaz.
- 5) Boaz paid the full price of redemption for both Naomi's land and for the responsibility of Ruth as a wife.
- 6) Boaz was a man of *character*.
 - His harvesters left grain to be gleaned by the poor, as prescribed in the Law. But he went above the legal requirement and had them leave extra for Ruth, revealing his generous heart for the LORD.

- He remained sexually pure and honored Ruth when she uncovered his feet in the night. He preserved her reputation by sending her home before light.
- Boaz was a man of prayer, who spoke blessings over his workers and Ruth.

Jesus Our Kinsman Redeemer—God's provision for the poor in spirit

Jesus is our ultimate Kinsman Redeemer and meets all the criteria listed above. All mankind are helplessly enslaved to sin, under the dominion of the evil one, unless and until we are redeemed by the One and Only Redeemer. Christ alone is God's provision!

- 1) Jesus is a ***near kinsman*** to mankind because he is fully human. He is described as our brother who redeems us from the power of sin.

For only as a human being could He die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death.

Hebrews 2:14

- 2) Jesus was willing to perform the work of redemption.

No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily. For I have the right to lay it down when I want to and also the power to take it again. For my Father has given me this command.

John 10:18

God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children.

Galatians 4:5

- 3) Jesus alone possessed the ability to redeem because He was sinless.

You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ

1 Peter 1:17-18

- 4) Jesus was free because He fulfilled the Law

Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them.

Matthew 5:17-18

- 5) Jesus offered Himself as the price of redemption.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Mark 10:45

- 6) Like Boaz, Jesus took His beloved as His bride (Ephesians 5:25, Revelation 19:7).

The Church is betrothed to Christ and is to be a pure virgin (2 Corinthians 11:2).

This week's Equipping Point:

Be your family's Kinsman Redeemer.

- You are the nearest kinsman to your family.
- You *want* to perform the work of redemption to set your family free and provide for them spiritually.
- You are not obligated to do so, you are motivated by love.
- If you are willing to let God cleanse you and set you free, as we discussed a couple of weeks ago, then you are free and able to redeem. You don't carry baggage with you, but you are not under the obligations of the world or of the Enemy—you are *God's* man and can do His work.
- You are charged to be Jesus to your family. You cannot pay the price for their sins, but you CAN minister to them in His name.
- I believe you have the character to do this. All year long we've been talking about the character required to spiritually lead your family, and I'm betting the men here this morning are men of integrity willing to be the conduit for your family to God.
 - We are to remain sexually pure like Boaz
 - Care for our families and the less fortunate of our society
 - Remain unburdened (or “unleveraged”) so that we're able to help others. (Provision for elderly parents, Tam's M.S.)

Quick Takeaways

1. In the midst of a very low period in the history of God's people, marked by weak faith and irresponsible living, God continues to surprise us by **raising up some of the most unlikely servants** to accomplish his will. Before it was Potiphar and his wife, the 10 faithless spies, Aaron and Miriam, Esau, and even the Midianites and Philistines.

Like a surprise UT draft pick from some podunk little Class 2A high school in East Texas, God uses a foreign woman, whose faith stands in stark contrast to the unbelief of the people who should know better. God used the example and faith of Ruth, one of the hated Moabites, to show his people what faith and character is supposed to look like. So as this outsider is taken into God's community of faith, our first takeaway is to withhold judgment on those not like us.

Can I suggest to you that this is very appropriate this week? If studying God's word has taught us anything, it's that He has everything under control, and we are foolish to dismiss those not like us, or who do not agree with us. If God could breathe fresh

life into the lineage of the Messiah by introducing someone as different as Ruth, is He not capable of doing so again today?

2. Even this early in the Old Testament **God is telegraphing His plan to reach the entire world** with the saving message of Christ. In the story of Ruth, the curtain is being drawn back on the hidden plan of God. Look at Colossians 1:

This message was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to his own holy people. For it has pleased God to tell his people that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory.

Colossians 1.26-7

3. **God is at work in the lives of the faithful even in the darkest of times.** I should trust Him even in life's darkest times when I do not "see" or "feel" God. Genuine faith, like that of Ruth, trusts God to always be working even when one does not see His hand. Joseph never lost sight of God's long-term purposes, and today's story of Ruth reinforces the promise that even in Naomi's desperation, even in the bleakness of destitute poverty of a couple of helpless widows, God never forgets His children.
4. **We have a responsibility to take care of marginalized people.** The law of God prescribed the means by which the last and the least could be provided for, and they very clearly reveal the heart of God for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. So my question is this: Three weeks before Thanksgiving, and a month and a half from Christmas, how could you or your family demonstrate God's compassion during the holidays this year?

This charge is not only for the rich and well-off, but for all of us. Boaz had abundant resources to care for Ruth, but look at the attitude of Ruth, who had no job and not two sticks to rub together: From page 123 in *The Story*:

Then Ruth said to Naomi, 'Let me go in the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.' When Boaz asked who Ruth was, the overseer said, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters." She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.'

Ruth 2:2, 5-7

Boaz later said,

May the LORD repay you for what you have done [for Naomi]. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Ruth 2:12

In this holiday season, let us remember that an "others-centered" life creates blessings for the giver. You may not think you have much, but I would beg to disagree. There are single moms here at Oak Hills who would love for a family to adopt their family and provide a Christmas for some kids who could use one, a family without a father. There are men and women who are between jobs who could use a night of encouragement, a

night to be treated with compassion and grace, because finding a job in this economy is deflating and discouraging.

There's no denying the story of Ruth is a great romance. But even more, it brings us to a defining episode in the greatest love story ever told. Boaz' love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsmen redeemer and foreshadows One who would step in as the Redeemer for all people. It turns out everyone is "chosen"—Jew and Gentile alike. Everyone, no matter what their circumstances, needs our help. And God can use even the most unlikely people, in our eyes, to accomplish His will.

May you today become the Kinsman Redeemer of your family.

Chapter 10: A Study in Contrasts

Contrast #1: Hannah and Peninnah

TRUTH:

Peninnah

- Faithless and disobedient
- Provoked and irritated Hannah because of her empty womb
- Peninnah had a full house, but an empty heart
- Her husband loved Hannah more than her
- None of Peninnah's children were notable
- Instead of responding to God with gratitude for her children, she acted hatefully and created a rivalry

Hannah

- Poured her heart out in prayer to the LORD, trusting in His mercy
- Never retaliated against her rival
- Vowed she would give her son to serve the LORD if He provided
- God answered her prayer and gave her five more children after Samuel
- She made good on her vow through obedience (annual robes)
- Received the favor of her husband

Lessons

1. God _____ of His children.
2. _____ vs. _____—take inventory wisely.
3. Our actions toward others reveal our _____.
Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'
4. _____ also reveal the true nature of the heart.
A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

Matthew 25:37-40

James 3:6

Contrast #2: Eli and Samuel

TRUTH: _____

Eli

- Did not lead his family well
- “The word of God was rare in those days”
- His blindness indicative of his leadership of Israel & his family
- Failed to turn Israel to God in a time of battle
- Lost the Ark the 2nd time around
- Fell from a place of honor to disgrace

Samuel

- A child conceived by grace
- God “let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground”
- “All Israel recognized that Samuel was a prophet of the Lord”
- Spoke the truth to power as a boy
- Won the battle with the Philistines
- Rose from humble beginnings to a place of honor

Lessons

1. We will be _____ by God because of sin we know about but fail to restrain.

2. Failure to _____ the next generation is catastrophic.

3. *“Joshua son of Nun died at the age of 110. After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.”*

The Story, p. 103

4. God is _____ when He is used as a lucky charm or flashed as a badge.

Don’t you see: It’s not the cut of a knife that makes a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It’s the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.

Romans 2:28-29

5. Your attitude toward the _____ of God reflects your attitude toward God.

Or don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Contrast #3: Saul and God

TRUTH: _____

Saul

- Impressive in the world's eyes
- Came from obscurity
- "He will take..." (p.135)
- It could have worked (p.140, 141)
- Fear makes you do stupid things
- Impetuous

God

- Impressed with non-conformity
- Part of the modus operandi
- God gives
- God is not single-threaded
- God is never late
- Patient and faithful

Lessons

1. Be careful _____...you may get it.
2. God can take an _____ and still use it as long as both the leadership and the people submit.
3. It's possible to rationalize disobedience with **anything**. _____
always trumps worship.

"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as Lord, but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.'"

Matthew 7:21-23

4. Focusing on your _____ almost always leads to trouble.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you consider yourself full or empty? Of the right things or the wrong things?
2. What religious props have you used in the past?
3. How certain can we be of things that we can't see?

Teaching Script

I always loved Roadrunner cartoons as a kid, mostly because of Coyote. That guy just never learned...

If you remember our study of the book of Proverbs a couple of years ago, you'll recall Solomon was forever contrasting two different kinds of people: the Wise and the Fool. You might also remember that the Hebrew sense of the word "fool" had nothing to do with IQ, but could be translated "thick-headed"—people who just never got it. People on whom experience was wasted time and time again. In other words, Coyote.

As we come to the close of the period of the Judges, four generations before Solomon, the description already applies. It was a time when "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25). Six times God would bring reproof and punishment to Israel through lawless enemies, and then raise up a judge to deliver His people. They just never got it.

But never let it be said God doesn't have a sense of humor. Last week we saw a ray of hope: God used an outsider—a Moabite woman named Ruth to show the nation what faithfulness looked like. After everything that had happened, Israel didn't want to be called out, or special, or holy—they just wanted to be like everybody else. It took a Moabite—and a woman at that—to show what called out looks like; what purity looked like; what it means to be different and set apart.

Then he used a nobleman named Boaz to show them something more: the Upper Story. Boaz revealed a glimpse of the future Messiah, who wouldn't just redeem the land, or a family of widows, but the entire world from their sin.

Chapter 10 today starts with a woman named Hannah. She had long endured the grief of childlessness. But on top of that, she also suffered the taunts of her husband's other wife, Peninnah, who had plenty of children but was empty of compassion. She had poured out her heart in desperate prayer for a son to be dedicated to the LORD.

God gave Hannah a son, and she kept her word. She named him Samuel and took him to serve in the tabernacle under the High Priest, Eli. It didn't take God long to start speaking through Samuel when he was still a boy. God told Samuel that Eli and his sons would be judged; the sun was setting on Eli's priesthood, and Samuel was next.

And of course God's word came true. Israel fought the Philistines and lost, but comically blamed their defeat on the absence of the ark of covenant. What was really missing was their obedience and surrender. So, when they faced the Philistine army again, this time with the ark as their good luck charm, they lost both the battle and the ark.

Samuel then took Eli's place, but what Israel really wanted was a king. Why?? Because everyone else had one! What Israel didn't understand was that who they really rejected was God, because He should be King. God warned that their demand for a king would be costly and that he would exploit them to the point of slavery. But like a child with their heart set on a pair of boots or a letter jacket that would ensure their acceptance by the

“in” crowd, they ignored His warnings and still insisted on having an earthly king to fight their battles.

So you know what God did? He gave them what they wanted—except this was a king who was just a little too pretty and way too cocky for his own good. Saul was anointed by Samuel and began well. He was affirmed by miraculous signs from God. He fought the Ammonites and gave God credit for their victory.

But Saul’s honeymoon was short-lived, because of course God was right. Choosing a human being as your king, however dashing he might be, over YHWH Himself is a recipe for disappointment. During another battle with the Philistines, Saul got nervous because Samuel was late. So Saul took his authority too far and took the offerings into his own hands, violating the role God had reserved for the priests. When Samuel showed up, Saul backpedaled, made excuses, and tried to justify his sin, but it was too late. Saul’s path of half-hearted obedience and fear-based leadership grew more twisted with every step. And when he spared Agag and the best livestock of the Amalekites, it was “game over.”

God was trying to get His people to see that monarchy is no better than anarchy when the leader is not submitted to God.

As *The Story* moves to Chapter 10, I believe we can read this chapter as a study in contrasts. God isn’t just telling the story of a nation, but three stories...three contrasts, three vignettes. Just like the Wise and Foolish in Proverbs, Chapter 10 lays two characters side by side as God illuminates for us the difference between faith and unbelief, between good leadership and bad, between emptiness and fullness.

So let’s examine these three scenarios, and how God clearly distinguishes the godless from the godly in these men and women.

Contrast #1: Hannah and Peninnah

TRUTH: *Your actions reveal your heart.*

Peninnah

- Faithless and disobedient
- Provoked and irritated Hannah because of her empty womb
- Peninnah had a full house, but an empty heart
- Her husband loved Hannah more than her
- None of Peninnah's children were notable
- Instead of responding to God with gratitude for her children, she acted hatefully and created a rivalry

Hannah

- Poured her heart out in prayer to the LORD, trusting in His mercy
- Never retaliated against her rival
- Vowed she would give her son to serve the LORD if He provided
- God answered her prayer and gave her five more children after Samuel
- She made good on her vow through obedience (annual robes)
- Received the favor of her husband

Lessons

1. **God hears the prayers of His children.** Some of you are fervently praying for.... Let me assure you...
2. Peninnah was **full but empty**; Hannah was **empty but full**—take inventory wisely. Reminds me of the parable of the rich fool... “rich toward God.”
3. **Our actions toward others reveal our attitude toward God.** Peninnah was vindictive and punitive, and there was no good reason.

Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

Matthew 25:37-40

4. **Words also reveal the true nature of the heart.**

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Matthew 15:19

We can learn much by observing the contrast between these two women.

Contrast #2: Eli and Samuel

TRUTH: True leadership is anointed.

Eli

- Did not lead his family well
- “The word of God was rare in those days”
- His blindness indicative of his leadership of Israel & his family
- Failed to turn Israel to God in a time of battle
- Lost the Ark the 2nd time around
- Fell from a place of honor to disgrace

Samuel

- A child conceived by grace
- God “let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground”
- “All Israel recognized that Samuel was a prophet of the Lord”
- Spoke the truth to power as a boy
- Won the battle with the Philistines
- Rose from humble beginnings to a place of honor

[Luke 14 example of last bullets]

Lessons

1. **We will be judged by God because of sin we know about but fail to restrain**—this is one of the burdens of leadership. The sons were abusing their priestly role by take the best sacrifices for themselves and fornicating with women in the tabernacle (1 Sam. 2:17, 22).
2. **Failure to pastor the next generation is catastrophic.** We saw this two weeks ago at the beginning of the Judges...

Joshua son of Nun, servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110. ... After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

The Story, p.103

Chronic amnesia and a refusal to teach the Word of God will absolutely reduce the Church to irrelevance in a generation. I’d imagine Eli was very familiar with the passage in Deuteronomy 6 that says, “teach them diligently to your children, when you sit in the house or walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up...” Failure to capitalize on the daily teachable moments with your kids leads to this Scripture: the church’s irrelevance in one generation.

3. **God is mocked when He is used as a lucky charm or flashed as a badge.**

Israel lost the first battle with the Philistines because they failed to inquire of God. They lost the second one because they still failed to inquire, and then misused the symbols of the presence of God as a rabbit's foot. This is NOT anointed leadership.

The Bible is littered with examples of people who used their religiosity to flash around and impress people. I think of the Romans in Romans 2: "As Jews, we have the law! We've been circumcised! We have our religious credentials! Look at our heritage!"

The Roman Christians were bragging on their circumcision, much like Israel was flashing around the ark of the covenant. Paul said:

Don't you see: It's not the cut of a knife that makes a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It's the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.

Romans 2:28-29

4. Your attitude toward the representation of God reflects your attitude toward God.

I had a friend once who decided he'd put an ichthus, or one of those fish symbols on the back of his car. He decided he needed some sort of visible witness on his car. My question back to him was, "What about not driving like a bat out of hell?" He was an absolute maniac on the road. I said, "Don't you think your witness for Christ might be more effective if you didn't worry so much about figurines and more about the anger that makes you drive recklessly?"

What about your treatments of the representations of God? Some think that Christianity is displayed by a cross or an open Bible. But since the ark was the symbol of the presence of God, a better modern-day equivalent might be your body. Because the Holy Spirit lives in you as a believer, how well do you care for the temple?

Or don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Why? Because YOU are the dwelling place.

Our second contrast was between priests; the final contrast is between kings...

Contrast #3: Saul and God

TRUTH: *The certainty of things we cannot see.*

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

Saul

- Impressive in the world's eyes
- Came from obscurity
- "He will take..." (p.135)
- It could have worked (p.140, 141)
- Fear makes you do stupid things
- Impetuous

God

- Impressed with non-conformity
- Part of the modus operandi
- God gives
- God is not single-threaded
- God is never late
- Patient and faithful

Lessons

1. Be careful what you ask for...you may get it.
2. God can take an unwise decision and still use it as long as both the leadership and the people submit.
3. It's possible to rationalize disobedience with anything—even worship.
Obedience always trumps worship.

"But I was going to use those animals as sacrifices..."

"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as Lord, but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.'"

Matthew 7:21-23

4. Focusing on your circumstances almost always leads to trouble.

The Story p.115

Like Saul, people often underestimate their enemy, hide in caves and among the rocks, they quake with fear, and see no relief in sight. Saul, as an ungodly leader, allowed his people to focus on their circumstances instead of on God's promises.

When Samuel arrived and asked what in the world was going on, listen to Saul's response:

"When I saw the men were scattering, that you didn't come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling..." When I focused on the circumstances, and started adding things up, and you didn't show...I felt compelled....

The greatest barrier to great leadership is allowing *feelings* to overtake *facts*. Saul felt afraid, but the fact was that God had always come through.

Now, look at the thread that weaves throughout these three vignettes:

- Hannah and Penninah show how we treat others reflects our attitude toward God.
- Eli and Samuel illustrate that our use of props reflects our attitude toward God.
- Saul shows us our rationalizations reflect our attitude toward God.

The common denominator: Whatever you're doing at the moment: driving your car, making a sale, talking with your kids, avoiding your kids, talking about someone else... Whatever you're doing at any given moment, you're telegraphing two things: the *condition of your heart*, and your *personal theology*. God shows us in these three vignettes that you are more transparent than you think. Because the true condition of your heart is on public display every day, flashing like a neon sign.

And your personal theology—whether you treat God as a Deity that can be bought off or as the God of the universe—is WAY more obvious than you think. Francis Schaeffer once said: "Idolatry is thinking thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him."

This week may we treat others as if we're interacting with Jesus Himself—because we are. May we focus less on our religious symbols and more on the Holy Spirit that lives within us. May we honor that Spirit within by worshipping authentically.

These lower stories of Chapter 10 point to the great message of the Upper Story of God: that as tall and handsome as you are, as talented as you are, as much of an anointed leader you are, no earthly king will be righteous enough to keep this chosen nation holy. A God-man will be required to lead us from sin, to make our worship more than just empty gestures, to show us how to treat our fellow man, to defeat our rationalizations and excuses, and to win the final battle against our common enemy. Once again, everything points to Jesus, in the great pursuit and redemption of the world.

[prayer]

Remind us that we are billboards of one kind or another. Remind us our treatment of both the poor and the powerful speaks volumes about the condition of our hearts. Remind us that true worship is authentic. Help us revere You, in Your proper place.

Fill Your temples with Your Spirit.

Chapter 11: A Compass After God's Own Heart

1. Focus on the mission God has put in front of you _____.

"The most radical thing you can do spiritually is to do the very next thing God tells you to do."

2. Never let _____ be your compass.

"Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world. For my purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

—Tennyson

3. David's third "toward" episode: straight to _____.

You are my strength; I wait for you to rescue me, for you, O God, are my place of safety. In his unfailing love, my God will come and help me. He will let me look down in triumph on all my enemies. But as for me, I will sing about your power. I will shout with joy each morning because of your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety in the day of distress. O my strength, to you I sing praises, for you, O God, are my refuge, the God who shows me unfailing love.

Psalms 59:9-10, 16

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in his presence.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

"How glorious the king of Israel looked today! He exposed himself to the servant girls like any indecent person might do!"

2 Samuel 6:20

"David retorted to Michal, 'I was dancing before the LORD, who chose me above your father and his family!'"

2 Samuel 6:21

Observations and Takeaways

1. _____ to leadership is always important.

At the place where the road passes some sheepfolds, Saul went into a cave to relieve himself. But as it happened, David and his men were hiding in that very

cave! "Now's your opportunity!" David's men whispered to him. "Today is the day the LORD was talking about when he said, 'I will certainly put Saul into your power, to do with as you wish.'" Then David crept forward and cut off a piece of Saul's robe. But then David's conscience began bothering him because he had cut Saul's robe. "The LORD knows I shouldn't have done it," he said to his men. "It is a serious thing to attack the LORD's anointed one, for the LORD himself has chosen him." So David sharply rebuked his men and did not let them kill Saul.

1 Samuel 24:3-7

"You servants must submit to your masters and show them complete respect, not only to those who are kind and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. God will bless you for this, if you endure the pain of undeserved suffering because you are conscious of his will."

1 Peter 2:18-19

2. Always wait for God's _____.

- If you've got to force your way, it probably isn't.
- If you've got to form a coup, it probably isn't.
- If you've got to destroy something to get to it, it probably isn't.
- If it comes to you, esp. as a result of prolonged prayer, it probably is.
- If the counsel of wise friends warn you, it probably isn't.
- If the counsel of rash friends encourage you, it probably isn't.
- If the counsel of wise friends encourage you, it probably is.

3. Good leaders know when to _____.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of your revealed missions do you most need to focus on right now?
2. Describe a time when someone you know "ran towards" and not "ran from."
3. What questions help you discern God's timing in your life?

Teaching Script

If you're a fan of classical music, then you probably know the name "Rostropovich." Mstislav Rostropovich was a world-famous cellist until his death in 2007. Since his exile from his native Russia in 1974, he has lived in the West. He served for 17 years as music director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington.

Rostropovich was always something of a rebel, a non-conformist. In 1970, Rostropovich sheltered Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who otherwise had nowhere else to go. In the early 1990's, when the Kremlin hard-liners pulled their August Coup, Rostropovich was in Paris. But, instead of flying back to the U.S. and to safety, he and his family flew straight home to Moscow. There, he took up his place in the Russian Federation Building that President Boris Yeltsin and his elected allies were holed up in. The situation was very tense. In the darkened corridors, someone gave him a Kalashnikov automatic rifle, but he returned it. Instead, he took out his cello and gave an impromptu recital to break the awful tension of the siege.

Have you ever known someone who surprised you, and did just the opposite of what you expected? Someone who ran into the fire instead of away from it? From the outside, you'd swear they had a backwards internal compass—running north when they should have run south. But what they really had was an uncommon courage and a moral trajectory that frequently led them down the road less traveled.

As we saw last week, Saul was a man's man. He was tall, handsome, and impressive...a likely choice for a king. He was just what Israel wanted. The problem was he was not God's man. King Saul cut corners and then pathologically rationalized everything...so God cut him out of the picture and set His sights a king who was, at the moment, singing songs and tending flocks in a nearby pasture.

This royal coronation began in the most improbable of places: the humble house of Jesse in a less than notable village called Bethlehem. We should have seen it coming. God has demonstrated a knack of showing up in the unlikeliest of places, calling the most implausible people to the most inconceivable of missions. Three chapters ago He appeared to a hiding farmer named Gideon, who responded, "My clan is the weakest in the tribe of Manassah, and I am the least in my family." Last week, He appeared to Saul, who even though he was tall and handsome, said, "Aren't I a Benjamite from the smallest tribe in Israel, and my clan the least of all the clans in Benjamin?"

And now, sure enough, Samuel the priest is sent to another obscure agricultural family—a grandson of Ruth, where once again an improbable search is coming to an end. In true "American Idol" fashion, seven of Jesse's sons were paraded before Samuel, but none were chosen. The youngest brother, David, had not been invited but was easily found among the sheep. After being summoned from the fields, the choice was immediate: David was anointed by Samuel to replace King Saul. The boy then did what any newly anointed king would do: he returned to tending his sheep.

Mark this down in your Bibles, because this is the first of three instances where David did the opposite of what you'd expect—where he mixed up the "toward" and the "from." You would think a new king would head straight to the tailors to be fitted for his royal

robes, just like you or I would head to Brooks Brothers for a hand-sewn suit for our inauguration. He'd certainly make his second call to the goldsmith to have his new crown precisely fitted. A normal person would have made one of those Disney commercials: "David! You've just been anointed King of Israel! What will you do next?"

And David replies, "I'm going to Disney World!"

Not this guy. He quietly went back to his duties, fulfilling the role God had given him right then.

This leads to point #1 on your outlines:

1. Focus on the mission God has put in front of you *right now*.

It would be tempting to take your eye off the ball and start dreaming of the next step, planning your future, setting up your cabinet, but neglect the critical work that sits right in front of you.

But David was directionally challenged from the world's point of view. As we'll see throughout this chapter, he had a *compass* after God's own heart. And time and time again, God has proven that his philosophy is anti-establishment. The world says "he who dies with the most toys wins"—God says give freely, and don't worry about the math. The world says take hold of your destiny—God says he who loses his life will find it.

Example #1 of David's "from/towards" problem is that he headed not toward immediate glory and recognition, but toward his *current* mission. And our lesson from this story is clear: never take your eye off the ball, focus first on your current assignment.

Someone once said, "*The most radical thing you can do is the very next thing God tells you to do.*" It may not seem like it, but this is what radical obedience looks like. It's not doing what God says because you can clearly see the end, or because He's revealed the entire parade route, but to do the *very next* thing He tells you, regardless of how crazy it sounds. Go do your job—go be a husband—go be a dad—go be a brother. Today, head first toward your revealed mission.

After that, for a while, life got quiet for the newly anointed boy king until he was once again called from the fields, this time to supply his brothers on the frontlines of battle against the Philistine army. When he arrived, David saw what everyone else did not: an opportunity for God's power to be displayed. Goliath had intimidated everyone. But for the 2nd time, David's "towards/from" indicator was on the fritz, and he ran *toward* the giant.

The Bible says,

*As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly **toward** the battle line to meet him.*

1 Samuel 17:48

This is the second point on your outline, also today's **Equipping Point**:

2. **Never let fear be your compass.**

How was David able to do such an improbable and ridiculous thing? He had two things: faith and practice. On the final paragraph of page 148 of *The Story*, David said to Saul...

Later today we'll be burying a friend of mine—in fact, another David—David Tomkewitz. Just as God prepared King David to face his Goliath by fighting a lion and a bear, so God prepared David for his Goliath: a slow, tortuous battle with liver cancer.

My friend David also fought a lion and a bear first. He fought the lion tenaciously for custody of his sheep—his stepsons that really, really needed a good father-figure to watch and to emulate. He fought the bear when his own father died seven years ago—the man whom he had watched and emulated, who convinced him that nothing was impossible.

So when the time came to fight his Goliath of liver cancer—he was battle-hardened. He had protected his own over and over, shepherded his family, fought tenaciously for them, and while the disease claimed his life Saturday night, it never claimed him. His giant never defined him.

One of the quotes at the funeral today will be from Tennyson: *"Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world. For my purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."*

David Tomkewitz's battle with cancer was an epic one, that was fought much longer than anyone thought possible, because his compass, like the compass of King David, was set the wrong direction: toward the fight, toward life, toward the threat to what he had built with his family.

Who in their right mind would run toward the giant? Two men named David...

After killing Goliath, David's days in the pastures were over. Saul brought him into the king's court and assigned him a high rank over military operations. David was well liked and successful in all his pursuits. He eventually married Saul's daughter, Michal, and became best of friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. But his success planted an irreversible seed of jealousy in Saul, to the point where he tried repeatedly to murder David.

Saul's fear and irrational behavior went berserk. But once again, David's navigational instincts got all mixed up, because while he had to run **from** Saul, in one instance he actually ran **toward** him. On one occasion, he went **toward** Saul and instead of killing his rival, chose to extend mercy and grace to his tormentor. But Saul's new lease on life was as short as his fuse, and the chase quickly resumed.

3. **David's third "toward" episode: straight to God.**

David found consolation by journaling his fears and his faith in his psalms. Listen to how he ran **toward** the God who had appointed him:

You are my strength; I wait for you to rescue me, for you, O God, are my place of safety. In his unfailing love, my God will come and help me. He will let me look down in triumph on all my enemies. But as for me, I will sing about your power. I will shout with joy each morning because of your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety in the day of distress. O my strength, to you I sing praises, for you, O God, are my refuge, the God who shows me unfailing love.

Psalm 59:9-10, 16

When you feel option-less, exasperated, unheard, or confused, is your response to run **away**, or to run **toward**? To flee or to worship? David not only prayed during the scary times, but he also didn't fail to worship—to run toward God—after the victories were won. David made a fool of himself dancing in front of the ark as both of them returned to Jerusalem—so much so that he embarrassed his wife.

I don't know about you, but I feel that as a dad, it is my God-given mission to publicly humiliate my children. Maybe it's the same kind of embarrassment my daughters feel when I begin speaking German very loudly in Dillard's, or try to dance with them on the escalator in the mall. The other day I made up a rap and started singing it to Tori—she laughed so hard for a while she forgot to breathe.

I personally believe that fathers are commissioned—and I'm pretty sure it's in Scripture somewhere—to flagrantly embarrass their children on a regular basis. But this isn't the kind of embarrassment Michal felt as she watched David dance in front of the ark. This was the embarrassment of someone who had never had to trust God for everything, including their next breath. This was someone who didn't get it.

Michal couldn't possibly understand the joy and salvation that David felt, because he'd been brought out of the valley of death. He had been hunted like a rabid animal. So you see that David really had no choice but to totally lose all decorum and look like an absolute fool. What's that verse in 1 Corinthians?

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in his presence.

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

When was the last time you ran so uncontrollably and unashamedly toward God that you looked stupid doing it? When was the last time you became so overwhelmed by the fact that He would use you—with all your flaws and imperfections and schizophrenia—that you fell to your knees in gratitude?

But Michal just didn't get it. She scoffed:

“How glorious the king of Israel looked today! He exposed himself to the servant girls like any indecent person might do!”

2 Samuel 6:20

Did she manage to shame him? Not in the least...David was too busy running toward God. David's response was not that of a self-conscious statesman. He knew where this bitter reaction came from.

"David retorted to Michal, 'I was dancing before the LORD, who chose me above your father and his family!'"

2 Samuel 6:21

Michal was much more Saul's daughter than David's wife or Jonathan's sister. Because when she became sarcastic with David it was the pride of Saul and his narcissism that drove her to pettiness, not the Spirit of God in her husband or the love that was in her brother. And verse 23 of 2 Samuel 6 says Michal remained childless throughout her life. God knew that as David's wife and Saul's daughter, any son of hers would have a strong claim to the throne. And so because of her pride, and her refusal to bow her own knee to the Lord, and celebrate with her husband, God left her womb as barren as her heart.

Anytime you see someone chastising someone else's worship, you can bet it's a pride issue.

Some final takeaways and general observations about this amazing chapter in *The Story*:

1. **Submission to leadership is always important.**

If anyone had a reason to depose a leader, having already been anointed for the position himself, it was David. But here's what happened:

At the place where the road passes some sheepfolds, Saul went into a cave to relieve himself. But as it happened, David and his men were hiding in that very cave! "Now's your opportunity!" David's men whispered to him. "Today is the day the LORD was talking about when he said, 'I will certainly put Saul into your power, to do with as you wish.'" Then David crept forward and cut off a piece of Saul's robe. But then David's conscience began bothering him because he had cut Saul's robe. "The LORD knows I shouldn't have done it," he said to his men. "It is a serious thing to attack the LORD's anointed one, for the LORD himself has chosen him." So David sharply rebuked his men and did not let them kill Saul.

1 Samuel 24:3-7

David was so sensitive to God's will, he felt guilty for cutting off a piece of Saul's robe. Why? Because it caused him status and embarrassment in front of his soldiers. The translation for us today: if you work for a bad boss, it's not enough to just grudgingly do what he or she says. You must show them respect, even when you're talking outside the office—even to people that don't know them. Listen to Peter's instruction:

"You servants must submit to your masters and show them complete respect, not only to those who are kind and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. God will bless you for this, if you endure the pain of undeserved suffering because you are conscious of his will."

1 Peter 2:18-19

It may be harsh, it may not be fair, but for as long as you work where you work, it's your responsibility to show respect to your supervisors, even when they're not around. Even when you don't think anyone's listening. You can never be a good leader unless you first become a good follower.

Which leads to #2:

2. Always wait for God's *timing*.

It's hard to know when we're jumping the gun, or running ahead of the headlights. It would have been easy for David to assume a lot of things, to push Saul out of the way after he was anointed. I don't know anyone who hasn't struggled with the question of God's timing. Do I stay? Do I go? Turn left? Turn right? What does God want me to do? But in this story, we can see some very concrete lessons and signs about when something probably *is* God's timing and when it probably *isn't*:

- If you've got to force your way, it probably isn't.
- If you've got to form a coup, it probably isn't.
- If you've got to destroy something to get to it, it probably isn't.
- If it comes *to you*, esp. as a result of prolonged prayer, it probably is.
- If the counsel of wise friends warn you, it probably isn't.
- If the counsel of rash friends encourage you, it probably isn't.
- If the counsel of wise friends encourage you, it probably is.

And then there's one takeaway from our lesson today—the really hard one:

3. Good leaders know when to *step down*.

You may have been influential at one time. You may have felt the Lord's anointing at one time in your position. But in Saul we see the dark side of leadership—a disrespect of God's direction, a deafness to His instruction, and a stubborn insistence to hold on to power as long as you can.

God's choice of Saul as king in the first place was a result of grace—not because Israel needed a king, not because it was God's will, but only because of grace. And God gave him a great head start: courage, early victories...but God in His wisdom and perfect timing also chooses to remove people from influence. Has that ever happened to you? And this morning, as tough as it is to accept, I submit to you that if we will accept His grace in appointments to leadership, we must also be willing to accept His decisions when it's time to step down.

In this incredible story, David responded to his anointing with awestruck worship and gratitude, knowing that distant generations of his own family would welcome the King whose reign would never end. Though David may not have fully recognized it at the time, he had indeed built a house for God...the temple of his heart.

The Upper Story of the Bible is in clear form in the story of David, a man of grace who submitted to the leaders over him, waited for God's timing, and, as we'll see at the end of the next chapter, knew when it was time to turn over the reins.

In the Upper Story, once again we see an Old Testament character foreshadowing the Christ: the King of Kings who submitted to the will of His Father, whose timing was perfect, and who, after His resurrection, turned over His earthly presence to the Spirit of God, so that He could live in each of our temples.

Chapter 12: The Essence of the Gospel

Four Key Theologies

1. _____

Key components:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1:15

Sin is an _____. Sin is evil _____.



We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5

2. _____

Forgiveness that's conditional isn't forgiveness at all; it's just _____.

I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.

John 5:24

So we praise God for the wonderful kindness he has poured out on us because we belong to his dearly loved Son. He is so rich in kindness that he purchased our freedom through the blood of his Son, and our sins are forgiven.

Ephesians 1:6-7

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:1-2

Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself.

Romans 8:33

For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us...our acquittal is not based on our good deeds. It is based on our faith.

Romans 3:23-25,27b

3. _____

When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.

Psalms 32:3-5

To confess your sins to God is not to tell Him anything He doesn't already know. Until you confess your sins, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.

—Frederick Buechner

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

John 1:8-10

Confession is _____ with God about your sin and _____ His perspective of it.

"Lord, you are in the right; but our faces are covered with shame, just as you see us now. This is true of us all, including the people of Judah and Jerusalem and all Israel, scattered near and far, wherever you have driven us because of our disloyalty to you. O LORD, we and our kings, princes, and ancestors are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him."

Daniel 9:7-9

4. _____

Consequences are what we live with in this world to remind us of _____.

And have you entirely forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you, his children? He said, "My child, don't ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don't be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children." As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Whoever heard of a child who was never disciplined? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all.

Hebrews 12:5-8

Today's Equipping Point:

Build _____ around yourself.

Discussion Questions

1. Be honest: Where is the pattern of sin hardest to resist in your life?
2. What inescapable consequences do you still live with?
3. Starting today, what will you do to be more intentional about confession?

Teaching Script

As we come to Chapter 12 of *The Story*, we come to a well-known part of David's story—the sin between him and Bathsheba and its after-effects. It's at the same time one of the saddest AND one of the most illuminating stories in the Bible.

You're familiar with the details...

David was the last person on the battlefield you'd pick to play the hero's part, but David was the underdog who overcame. He was the last person you'd pick to become king, but he confronted lions, bears, and giants with bare hands and bold faith. At last, the man after God's own heart had become the man on Israel's throne.

But kings who stay home from battle are seldom at rest. David's eyes wandered and so did his heart. He summoned the very lovely and very married Bathsheba to his palace and then into his bed. When Bathsheba sent word she was pregnant, David concocted a twisted conspiracy.

He called Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, home from the battlefield to visit his wife, expecting a night together would position Uriah as the father-to-be. The plan failed, so David concocted a surefire Plan B. He sent Uriah back to the frontlines carrying his own death warrant. David ordered General Joab to engineer a battlefield "accident" and guarantee Uriah's death. The plan worked. David married Bathsheba and went back to the business of the kingdom.

Then Nathan, the prophet, came to the palace. Guilty kings never fare well when prophets arrive for a visit—it happened with Samuel and Saul, and now with David. Nathan told a parable and pointed the finger of blame squarely in David's face. He asserted, "You are the man!" and the jig was up. Not even a master rationalizer like Saul could've wormed his way out of this one. So, the man after God's own heart had become the man with blood on his hands; and what's more, the wedding feast turned quickly into mourning the death of their son. David repented of his sin, and God forgave him. But after that, things would never, ever be the same.

In this chapter, there are four key theological concepts bundled together that are very Biblical, but can be very confusing. There is perhaps no other place in Scripture where these four realities are so intertwined within one story, and so it seems appropriate that we laser in on these subjects, not just to illuminate the story of David, but to see our own lives very clearly. We have in this story a window into some pretty deep theology that often confuses and discourages people. And believe me, the enemy would like nothing more than for us to miss these lessons, so that we permanently despair over our sins, leave them unattended, and allow them to create distance between ourselves and God, and between each other.

I'm convinced that this story is the story of *every single man* in this room, in this church. Each one of us struggles with these four truths every day.

1. Sin

Whether your name is Adam or Brad, Eve or Cheryl, it's your biggest problem. God, through the prophet Nathan holds David alone accountable for the sin. I'm convinced men too often find themselves in a place they never intended to be because they fail to recognize the pattern of sin. By inching closer and closer, our defenses come down and our sin nature rises to the surface.

David's descent into sin (p. 131)

David's temptation followed a longstanding pattern.

- a. **He saw**. Perhaps he could not help but see her, but he could have stopped watching.
- b. **He desired**. His lust overtook his sense and his morality. At this point he didn't even keep his interest a secret. He inquired about her to others and found out she was married. Regardless of the fact that David was already married to Michal, he wanted another woman. Disregarding her husband, he wanted THIS woman. Disregarding the Law of God prohibiting adultery, which was punishable by the death penalty, he still wanted her more than he wanted to honor God.
- c. **He took**. Knowing full well that she was married, he took her for himself. He robbed the honorable Uriah of his wife (and later his life). He abused the power of his position, a position given to him by God. The text reads as though this was a one-night stand.

The Pattern of Sin

Eve had a similar descent into sin in the Garden. Look at that episode on page 5 of *The Story*. Pay special attention to the verbs.

- a. **She saw**. Eve saw that the fruit of the forbidden tree was good and pleasing to the eye.
- b. **She desired**. The fruit was desirable for gaining wisdom, or so she thought.
- c. **She took**. She *took* the fruit, she *took* the word of the serpent over the word of God, and she *took* her husband down with her.

It's not the seeing...it's not the wanting...it's the ingestion of evil that's the problem.

We talked about this two years ago when we studied Proverbs 5—remember “drinking from your own well?” Talked about desire, lust, where temptation leaves off and sin begins...

James 1 says this:

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1:15

That word translated “conceived” is actually more often translated “to take—to seize for oneself.” So perhaps another way to translate this verse would be, “When desire has been grasped, it gives birth to sin.”

So see what you think of this definition: where does temptation end and sin begin? I believe ***sin is an impulse indulged. Sin is evil ingested.*** If our new translation is true, that says, “When desire has been grasped, it gives birth to sin,” then sin is when you could let go of the thought, but you don’t. We decide to host and nourish impure thoughts.

Think of it this way: see those two buttons on your outline? Each of us has a choice: you can hit the “delete” key or you can hit the “refresh” key. But all too often, instead of releasing the thought or the image, we keep reloading it in our minds.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5

There it is. Taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ means “delete”, not “reload.” A thought held captive to Christ is a thought not entertained, not grasped, not seized. It’s a thought released.

We will all be tempted—even Jesus was tempted, which meant it had to be enticing—He had to want it, otherwise it wouldn’t be tempting! But sin is about the grasping, the ingestion, the swallowing of that temptation. Remember, when you’re tempted, it’s still not too late!

2. ***Forgiveness***

God stands willing to forgive our sins. If we are believers, our sins have already all been forgiven when we appropriated the blood of Jesus by faith. Our salvation is secure even when our hands are “dirty.” It’s really, really important to understand the nature of this forgiveness: it’s not conditional, it’s not dependent, and it’s not based on how well you keep your nose clean from now on. So many people feel like they need to keep on earning their salvation or they could somehow wake up one day without it. But we need to understand this:

Forgiveness that’s conditional isn’t forgiveness at all, it’s just *fair warning*. If I say “I’ll forgive you IF you say you’re sorry...” or “I’ll forgive you if you pay me back with interest...” that’s just fair warning.

I want you to hear the definitiveness, the completeness, the permanence of true forgiveness in these Scriptures:

I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.

John 5:24

So we praise God for the wonderful kindness he has poured out on us because we belong to his dearly loved Son. He is so rich in kindness that he purchased our freedom through the blood of his Son, and our sins are forgiven.

Ephesians 1:6-7

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:1-2

Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself.

Romans 8:33

For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us...our acquittal is not based on our good deeds. It is based on our faith.

Romans 3:23-25,27b

God initiates the change in the sinner status in that He brings him from a position of alienation to a state of forgiveness and right relationship with Himself. This reconciliation, or atonement, is offered to all who believe.

Forgiveness of sins does not cancel consequences. Eve, David, you, and I live with the natural consequences and sometimes even the discipline and judgment of God for our choices (more on this in a minute). But for now, we need to remember that when you believe and trust in Christ alone for salvation, your forgiveness is complete, backward and forward, *retrospectively* and *prospectively*.

3. Confession

First, let's listen to David's confession in Psalm 32:3-5:

When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.

To confess your sins to God is not to tell Him anything He doesn't already know. Until you confess your sins, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge.

—Frederick Buechner

And now the Apostle John:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

John 1:8-10

We need to see the **context** of this verse. Confession of our sin **cleanses** us. John is not saying that we are required to confess every single sin before God will forgive us. The forgiveness has already been taken care of. It's done—finished—lock, stock, and barrel—hook, line, and sinker. The forgiveness always has been, and always will be there. With confession, we're talking about a recognition that we are sinners and always in need of cleansing and forgiveness. (Note John 1:8-10.)

Confession is agreeing with God about your sin and acknowledging His perspective of it.

Lord, you are in the right; but our faces are covered with shame, just as you see us now. This is true of us all, including the people of Judah and Jerusalem and all Israel, scattered near and far, wherever you have driven us because of our disloyalty to you. O LORD, we and our kings, princes, and ancestors are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.

Daniel 9:7-9

In other words, if you lose your temper and yell at your wife, you're no less married than you were yesterday. But confession of your sin is the bridge back to a harmonious relationship, just as confession to God of our sins brings us back to a walk and communion with him that would not be possible if we continued to hang on to our pride, remained stubborn, and refused to acknowledge our weakness. It doesn't change our standing, but it does change the nature of our relationship, and our intimacy.

STOP: It's one thing to think something—it's completely another to say something out loud. There is great power in speaking something aloud. Knees: speak your confession to God...

4. ***Consequences***

Sin always gives birth to more sin.

Consequences with Eve: Immediately she and her husband hid from God. Their relationship with God was fractured, their relationship with one another was fractured and their new sin nature was passed on to every human born since, Jesus excepted. Sin gives birth to more sin.

Consequences with David: After Bathsheba became pregnant, David tried to cover his sin by arranging an opportunity for Uriah to think the baby was his own. When Uriah proved more noble than the king, David arranged for his battlefield demise. Sin gives birth to more sin.

But it didn't stop there. David's sin was forgiven, but its aftermath was calamitous:

- The baby conceived between he and Bathsheba died.
- His son Amnon conspired along with his uncle to rape his half-sister Tamar.
- Another son, Absalom, allowed his hatred and bitterness toward Amnon to fester for two years until he had Amnon killed. This caused Absalom to go AWOL for three years.
- This same Absalom attempted to usurp the throne, and his rise to power resulted in a rebellion. David instructed his troops to be gentle with his proud son, perhaps

because he connected the dots between Absalom's behavior and his own failures as a father. But the clash between David's army and Absalom's rebels was brutal. When Absalom was found hanging from a tree limb, Joab seized the moment and killed the conspirator. King David mourned in anguish when he heard the news.

Up until David's sin with Bathsheba, everything was going well. But the house of David and all his family suffered enormous consequences because of David's lack of leadership as the father and spiritual leader of his family. Is there a greater object lesson in the Bible for us than the story of David, who was known as Israel's greatest king, but watched his family literally pick each other off one by one.

You can be a captain of industry, but a failure as the spiritual leader of your home. You can win the Chairman's Inner Circle award every year as the top salesperson in your company, while your family disintegrates around you. You can be a king after God's own heart, but watch as conspiracy, incest, and murder eat your family alive.

My daughter's favorite comeback when punished: "But I thought you were supposed to forgive me!"

Consequences are what we live with in this world to remind us of the results of sin. They are not the fallout of a lack of forgiveness, but they are an ongoing reminder of the gravity of sin and its ripple effects throughout our lives. Consequences serve as a deterrent against future opportunities where we will be tempted to see, then to desire, then to take.

And have you entirely forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you, his children? He said, "My child, don't ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don't be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children." As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Whoever heard of a child who was never disciplined? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all.

Hebrews 12:5-8

Today's Equipping Point:

Build hedges around yourself.

- If you would have to hide it or lie about it, don't do it!
- Do nothing with someone from the opposite sex unless it's public.
 - Don't ride in a car with the opposite sex without a third party present.
 - Don't make personal phone calls to other employees of the opposite sex.
 - Don't lunch with the same people every day, unless it is as a group.
 - Keep emails strictly business.

Be careful about lingering eye contact.

If traveling, don't get adjoining hotel rooms. Ask for different floors.

Meet in the lobby, not in a room.

- Hedges at home

Eliminate TV temptation—get ride of premium movie channels.

Do not drive the opposite sex babysitter home alone.

Keep appropriate boundaries with neighbors.

Be especially careful with single parents who need helping hands.

- Hedges at church

Always serve together in groups on ministry projects.

Never counsel the opposite sex.

- Hedges for hobbies

Learn to share your spouse's hobby.

Give up a hobby that puts you in a vulnerable position.

Never enjoy a hobby alone with a person of the opposite sex.

We have many role models in our story today:

- Be like Uriah who had great personal integrity
- Be like Nathan, and have the courage to speak truth to power, or to a friend
- Be like David who, after he sinned, refused to run and hide from pride or embarrassment, but faced the music
- Be like David, who refused to let his past weigh him down. After the son conceived between he and Bathsheba died, he got up, cleaned up, worshipped, and made love to his wife. After he confessed his sin to God, and stopped trying to hide them, David proclaimed, "And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone."

The same is true of your guilt and your past: confess it, and rest assured your guilt is gone.

Chapter 13: Finishing Well

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh's daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites. The LORD had clearly instructed his people not to intermarry with those nations, because the women they married would lead them to worship their gods. Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And sure enough, they led his heart away from the LORD. In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship their gods instead of trusting only in the LORD his God, as his father, David, had done.

1 Kings 11:1-4

1. _____ - _____ .

Drink water from your own well—share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love.

Proverbs 5:15-19

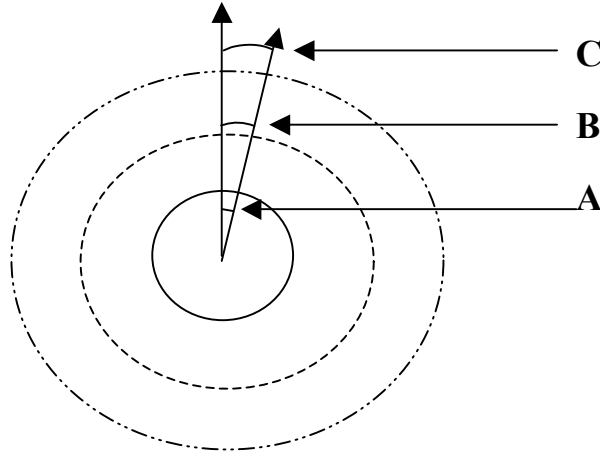
The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.

Proverbs 14:8

The wise think about where they're going.

Israel is a nation without sense; they have no wisdom at all. They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened.

Deuteronomy 32:28-29



Q: If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you're living now?

If the answer is no, then why *are* you living the life you are now?

2. Keep _____.

*Look, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great **hokmah**, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts. He is able to create beautiful objects from gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in cutting and setting gemstones and in carving wood. Yes, he is a master at every craft! Exodus 31:2-5*

Today's Equipping Point

Paul's Equipping Point to the Corinthians:

Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute, and love without stopping. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you chased after symptoms instead of core issues?
2. Who would've made a better impact on your life if they'd kept practicing?
3. How will you continue to seek wisdom, even after you have experienced success?

Teaching Script

In the late 19th century, Horatio Alger loved to write rags to riches stories. Stories about how down-and-out folks could achieve the American Dream of wealth and success through hard work, courage, and determination, like *Rocky*, or *Citizen Kane*, or *American Idol*, or even the Old Testament Joseph we studied in Chapter 3 of *The Story*.

But just as often, especially nowadays, you hear of riches to rags stories. You can't help but think of examples like O.J. Simpson, who looked so pitiful in court as he was sentenced for armed robbery. You think of Leon Spinks, who defeated Muhammad Ali to become the heavyweight champion of the world, who now works at a YMCA in Ohio for minimum wage. You think of Bernie Ebbers, once worth a billion dollars, now 63 years old and serving an 85-year prison term.

There are also spiritual riches to rags stories: Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard...and, perhaps, Solomon.

It's hard to deny that Solomon started out well—*really well*—and his reign began with a series of defining events. He married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, and ironically, the nation that had once enslaved Israel now sought the good graces of God's people. Then God appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered to grant his heart's desire. For all he could have had, Solomon asked for wisdom to lead, and God was pleased not just to grant his request, but give him wealth and honor as well.

Solomon's keen wisdom became the hallmark of his reign. He penned thousands of proverbs...and like Warren Buffett, the "Oracle of Omaha," people from around the world sought him out. And through him, Abraham's descendants became a blessing to the whole world. He had more wealth than Gates and Buffett combined, and more wisdom than Plato, Aristotle, and Mark Twain combined.

During Solomon's reign, peace prevailed in the Promised Land, so the time had come for Solomon to build a temple for God. The construction project was massive and followed the pattern of the tabernacle that had been used since the days of Moses. The end result was as majestic as one could imagine. With great reverence, Solomon had the ark placed in the Most Holy Place. The temple was filled with a cloud of God's glory, and Solomon humbly realized that even a magnificent temple could not sufficiently contain Him. This temple would become the enduring focal point of worship and life for God's people.

But following the dedication of the temple, God appeared to Solomon again and warned him of the consequences Israel would face if they turned away from Him. He promised,

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14

He also promised Solomon a royal dynasty if he remained faithful, but disaster if he and Israel followed other gods.

Well, as usual, God's timing was perfect. Because after all the grand ceremony around the dedication of the Temple, Solomon needed a reminder that all that pomp and circumstance was for naught without obedience—the daily grind of making good choices and rejecting temptation.

And so all of Solomon's insight and riches didn't make up for his bad choice to collect wives like gold. He married hundreds of women, many of them foreigners.

Here's what the Bible says:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides Pharaoh's daughter, he married women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites. The LORD had clearly instructed his people not to intermarry with those nations, because the women they married would lead them to worship their gods. Yet Solomon insisted on loving them anyway. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And sure enough, they led his heart away from the LORD. In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship their gods instead of trusting only in the LORD his God, as his father, David, had done.

2 Kings 11:1-4

This single decision shaped the future of his descendants and of the nation of Israel.

Solomon's story began with great promise, incomparable wisdom, and magnificent achievement. His two predecessors on the throne had also started out well. But the way each of them ended was disappointing to say the least. There are no final words of wisdom recorded for the wisest king of all time. Instead, his closing chapter reveals that the kingdom would be torn in two. Solomon spent his last days fighting off enemies and rebels. His splendor and his legacy were tarnished by disobedience and idolatry. What a sad ending for the king who had it all, but ultimately failed in the only thing that really mattered: finishing well.

Let's deconstruct the story of Solomon and glean a couple of key learnings on how we can avoid the same mistakes, and stay faithful. The first thing we need to do is this:

1. Root Cause Analysis

Although Scripture is not specific, it's instructive to consider this question: exactly where did it all go wrong for Solomon? What was the "tipping point?" Precisely when did it begin to unravel?

When I managed the Quality Assurance function at MCI years ago, we were tasked with this root cause analysis when it came to the dashboard metrics, to figure out why on-time connections were under par, or private customer networks hadn't achieved their up-time objectives. Sometimes it was a field engineer cutting corners on testing procedures. Sometimes it was a supplier defect with Northern Tel or Raytheon equipment. Sometimes it was because the salesperson was writing checks that network engineering couldn't cash.

And although it's only speculation in the case of Solomon, we can hazard some guesses about when things got out of synch, when the train started to veer off the tracks.

- Maybe it started way back when he first married Pharaoh's daughter— maybe that alliance opened the door just enough to rationalize hundreds of marriages to foreign women later on.
- Maybe it was an out-of-control sex drive. Listen to Solomon's words in Proverbs 5:

Drink water from your own well—share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love.

Proverbs 5:15-19

Isn't it ironic that the man who wrote those words required 700 wives and 300 mistresses? Was it an overactive libido? Solomon certainly wouldn't be the last person to suffer long-term consequences from a misplaced sex drive.

- Or maybe Solomon's taproot decision that began his descent was one of commerce. Maybe it was development of a trade route or a large-scale NAFTA agreement that eventually led to an exchange of personnel, which led to intermarrying, which led his heart away from God.

I submit to you that root-cause analysis in our lives is absolutely necessary. We must undertake the excavation of the nucleus of our behavior, to break the cycle and keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past, or the mistakes of others. Here's an example:

I've talked before about my dad, and I think decisions he made 40 years ago led to his suicide last year. I'm convinced the bottom-line issue for him was this: ***He completely defined himself by his work.*** With all the one-night stands, the sexual escapades, the pornography, it would be easy to look at these symptoms and conclude he had a libido problem. But for him, it started in his professional career, where a series of promotions got him the attention he never had from his father and made him someone completely defined by his work. The only thing that mattered was the next rung on the ladder. When he lost a long-time job through a management change, it sent him on a downward spiral from which he never recovered.

He had more jobs in the next five years than he'd had in his entire career, and I think those one-night-stands were him acting out his frustration. After he divorced my mom, he never forgave himself for what he did, and the snowball got bigger and bigger. So, I believe this was the sequence: Professional turbulence led to infidelity, which led to divorce, which led to self-hatred, which led to more professional problems, which led to depression, which led to suicide.

Can I encourage you today that if you find yourself in a tough place, or a rut, or in a season of estrangement from God because of a besetting sin, or hurt pride from a job loss, that you stop and do some root-cause analysis? In Proverbs, Solomon gave us the key when he said:

The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.

Proverbs 14:8

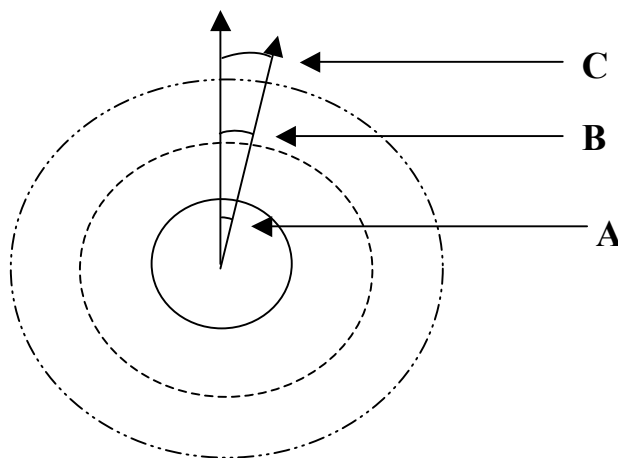
The wisdom of the wise is to give thought to their ways. In other words,

The wise think about where they're going. You may not realize it, but root-cause analysis is biblical. Here's how I know:

Israel is a nation without sense; they have no wisdom at all. They fail to see why they were defeated; they cannot understand what happened.

Deuteronomy 32:28-29

Translation: they just didn't get it. This is why we must continually recalibrate where we're going. Look at the diagram on your outline:



This is what Solomon failed to calculate—at Point “A”, a small deviation from true north may not seem to matter, but the further out you go, the further from center you become. Consider that Arc “C” is four times greater than Arc “A”. And how did Solomon wind up where he did, worshipping pagan gods? Very gradually: one decision at a time...one rationalization at a time.

Wise people think about where they're going. “Will the path I'm walking lead me to a place I want to go? If I keep heading this way, will I like where I wind up?”

You remember the movie “Groundhog Day” with Bill Murray? It's about a guy that kept living the same life over and over. Let me ask you a question (on your outline):

Q: If you were doomed to live the same life over and over again for eternity, would you choose the life you're living now?

This is an interesting question, but the kicker is the unspoken, potentially devastating follow-up: **If the answer is no, then why ARE you living the life you are now?**

I'm going to be quiet for a minute and let you re-read these two questions...

The first thing is to stop kidding ourselves and get to the core of what the issue is. But the second key is just as important:

2. **Keep practicing**

From our study of Proverbs two years ago, you may remember the most common Hebrew word for wisdom is “hokmah.” This is the word used to refer to the skill and experience of a craftsman.

In describing the skill required to build the tabernacle after they were delivered from Egypt, the Bible says:

*Look, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great **hokmah**, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts. He is able to create beautiful objects from gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in cutting and setting gemstones and in carving wood. Yes, he is a master at every craft!*

Exodus 31:2-5

If an artisan is called “wise,” then at least part of what wisdom means is “the art of living skillfully.” That means becoming a craftsman in loving our wives, raising our kids, handling our money, and living our lives.

This is why the second point is to keep practicing. What happens to a skill or a craft if you stop honing it? If you stop practicing? You know what happens: you lose your muscle memory, you lose your edge, you get sloppy.

This is why wisdom really has nothing to do with IQ, but has everything to do with living a practiced life. You may also remember that when Solomon talks about “ sluggards” or “being lazy”, he’s not talking about someone in love with a remote control. He’s talking about a man of wasted potential—a man who has great possibilities, but squanders his gifts. It’s not about SAT scores—it’s about misspent promise.

Somebody that immediately pops to mind is John Daly. If you don’t know him, John Daly is a big, beefy golfer who, in the last ten years had enough talent to win two majors on the PGA Tour, but who has also blown through four wives and, by his own reckoning, between \$50 and \$60 million dollars. He drinks, he smokes, and he’s been in rehab more times than you can count. He’s been thrown out of multiple tournaments. And he brought it all on himself. You have to ask yourself, What if this guy had kept practicing? What if he hadn’t frittered away all that talent and all that money? What if he had “hokmah”?

Solomon says, *The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways.* The wise think about where they are going. They’re intentional...they practice.

And of course you know the supreme irony: this is exactly what Solomon failed to do. He had both wisdom and riches, but in the end, they were lost on a man who squandered his gifts on pagan women and gods.

Look at the diagram again: we must plot the trajectory of where we’re going. Where will the choices you have made land you? As you look at your life at the outer circle, what kind of life will you have five years from now? Fifteen? Twenty-five?

Solomon did not finish well. David's family melted around him. Saul was a master at rationalization and committed suicide. But Bob Bourland was different. Bob Bourland finished well.

At his funeral on Monday, his friends and family remembered a man who was a deacon at the First Baptist Church of Odessa for 50 years. They remembered a man whose children and grandchildren grew up to fear the Lord. They remembered how, at age 80, he learned how to cook so he could care for his wife who had developed Alzheimer's. They recalled how, even after he was no longer physically able to take care of her, he visited her three times a day at the nursing home until her death.

Bob Bourland was my grandfather. And on Monday at his funeral, I was remembering that almost every time I visited him in the nursing home, he'd ask, "You preaching this weekend?" And then when it was time to leave, and I'd lean over to kiss him goodbye, he'd grab my hand, look me square in the eye, and say, "I pray for you every day."

You and I can do that—we can finish well. We cannot afford to be clueless, like the Israelites, and wonder what in the world happened. Too much is at stake.

And so our Equipping Point today is this:

Keep practicing.

Stay in the Word. Be fervent in prayer.

This was Paul's Equipping Point to the Corinth church:

Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute, and love without stopping.

1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Such could be said of Bob Bourland—such can be said of each of us.

Granddaddy finished well. And I'm happy to tell you that just in time for what would have been their 75th anniversary, Bob and Grace Bourland are back together, celebrating and worshipping on what is no doubt their most extraordinary Christmas ever: sitting at the feet of the Christ child, to whom they gave their hearts every day of their lives.

May the same be said of us: those guys got to the heart of the matter...those guys kept practicing...those guys finished well.

[Prayer]

So many cannot look in the mirror...

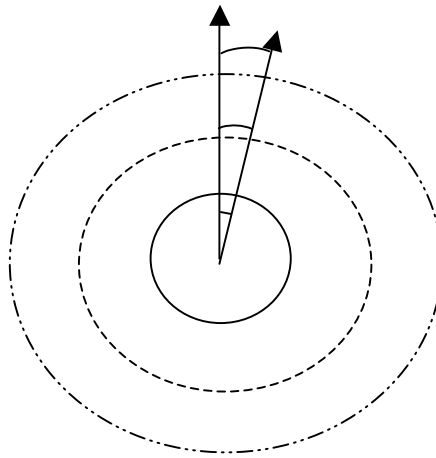
Give us an uncommon courage that digs beneath the surface, that roots out sin where it germinates, that discards anything not of the Spirit.

Help us to be craftsmen as we live our lives...sharpen the sword of the Spirit within us...give us spiritual stamina to practice, to train all of our lives, and in the end, to finish well. In the name of the One whose faithfulness set us free...

Chapter 14: Leadership Lessons from the Cockpit

“The mishap has already occurred;
the aircraft is now simply proceeding to the crash site.”

=====> Where are you proceeding?



To paraphrase the Air Force,

“The _____ had already occurred. _____ was simply proceeding to the crash site.”

Takeaways

1. Rehoboam: Bad leaders are _____.
2. Both kings: Bad leadership promotes _____.

*There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam.
There was war between Abijah and Jeroboam throughout Abijah's lifetime.*

3. Jeroboam: Bad leadership originates in _____.

Today's Equipping Point

Never stop trusting your _____

4. Jeroboam: Bad leadership always involves _____.

- Have you asked anyone to shade the truth for you recently?
- Do you habitually tell only *part* of the truth?

He will abandon Israel because Jeroboam sinned and made all of Israel sin along with him."

1 Kings 14:16

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been able to see a crash coming?
2. In what ways do we deceive ourselves and shade the truth?
3. When you experience "spatial disorientation" or "spiritual disorientation", how will you anchor yourself going forward?

Teaching Script

Many of you remember singer-songwriter John Denver. In the 70's and 80's he was very popular with his combination folk-country tunes that included "Take Me Home, Country Roads," "Sunshine on my Shoulders," and "Rocky Mountain High." My little sister had this huge crush on him—I remember taking her to one of his concerts—she played his songs all the time and cried all the way through the concert.

The world was saddened 11 years ago when the single-engine plane he was piloting crashed just off the Pacific Coast and he was killed on impact. But what's even sadder is that his death was both hastened and avoidable. In fact, some have called John Denver's mishap "an accident waiting to happen." One person went even further and said that in a way, John Denver's death was a suicide.

Let me first explain something about the airplane he was flying...*[explain fuel selector handle position, right rudder, etc.]*

Now let me read you the final paragraph of the official inquiry into the crash by the NTSB:

The National Transportation Safety Board determines the probable cause of this accident was the pilot's diversion of attention from the operation of the airplane and his inadvertent application of right rudder that resulted in the loss of airplane control while attempting to manipulate the fuel selector handle. Also, the Board determines that the pilot's inadequate preflight planning and preparations, specifically his failure to refuel the airplane, was causal. The Board determines that the builder's decision to locate the unmarked fuel selector handle in a hard-to-access position, unmarked fuel quantity sight gauges, inadequate transition training by the pilot, and his lack of total experience in this type of airplane were factors in this accident.

Listen again to the causal list in the report:

- Pilot's diversion of attention from the operation of the airplane
- Inadequate pre-flight planning
- Failure to refuel the airplane
- Inadequate training by the pilot
- His lack of experience in this type of airplane

Mark Tidwell, one of our executive ministers here at our church, spent a good deal of his 20 years in the Air Force in aircraft safety. He told me about a saying they frequently used while they were debriefing flight incidents (on your outline):

The mishap has already occurred; the aircraft is now simply proceeding to the crash site.

In other words, there are certain actions a pilot or aircrew perform, or do not perform, which make an aircraft mishap simply a matter of time.

And so, it seems an appropriate question for us to ask as we begin a new year: **Where are you proceeding?**

John Denver's habitual pattern of cutting corners, failure to plan, and diverting his attention from what he was doing was an eventual recipe for disaster. As long as he kept flying with those habits, and without the necessary training, it was fairly certain that sooner or later his plane would arrive not on a runway, but at an accident site.

Even small, seemingly insignificant deviations from true north, over time, set us on a path that can eventually become unrecoverable. Here's what I mean...

If you'll remember our study of Solomon in Chapter 13, God's instructions to keep the nation of Israel flying level and full of fuel were clear. Look at page 188-89 of *The Story*....

There's the flight manual. Now, look how Solomon piloted his kingdom: page 191-192...

An ongoing accumulation of bad habits doomed both John Denver and Solomon. By the time we get to Chapter 14, we can rephrase the Air Force and say,

The sin had already occurred. Israel was simply proceeding to the crash site.

Once again, our lesson this morning is on leadership—what I believe is the biggest issue facing the church today. In the four months since *The Story* began, we have studied leadership in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, and Saul. These were the pilots of their families and their nation no less than you are the pilot of your family.

And what happens in Chapter 14 of *The Story* is, more than anything else, caused by pilot error. The primary aviators at the wheel are Solomon, Rehoboam, and Jeroboam, plus a host of kings that made bad choices after them.

And what we will see is that because of Solomon's disobedience, Israel began a tailspin that was unrecoverable, even after Jeroboam and Rehoboam followed him.

This chapter is all about leadership—so this chapter is all about you and me, because every one of us is a leader, like it or not. All of us are influencers in our families, our companies, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our church.

Let's look at examples of leadership in Chapter 14 of *The Story*—we call our study this morning, "Leadership Lessons from the Cockpit."

Takeaways

1. Rehoboam: Bad leaders are insecure.

When faced with a decision to show grace as a leader, to serve his kingdom rather than have his kingdom serve his own ego, Rehoboam chose the latter. Leaders who rule by intimidation and domination aren't leaders at all: their hunger for approval can never be satisfied, so they demand capitulation. I've worked for people like that and I'm sure you have too.

Insecure leaders are men who:

- Always have something to prove
- Never got attention/approval from father figures
- Afraid they don't measure up

- Won't deal with their baggage
- Always throws up a smoke screen, an excuse
- Driven by shortcomings, not strengths

And so our lesson from Rehoboam is to leave your insecurities behind so that you do not castigate your wife, your employees, or anyone under your charge. Doing so, only hastens your arrival at the crash site.

2. Bad leadership promotes division.

Solomon had flown the plane into treacherous airspace by giving in to the pagan worship of many of his wives, instead of keeping God on the throne. His loyalties were divided, so the split between the Northern and Southern kingdoms was a natural consequence of flying in the enemy territory where Solomon had piloted the nation in the first place. I mean, if they couldn't agree on the same God, how could they possibly hope to be unified in any other way?

There is a reason the first two of the Ten Commandments deal specifically with no other gods and no graven images. There is a reason Jesus spent the entirety of John 17 in prayer for unity. There is a reason Paul and Peter spent so much of their ink on recognizing false prophets. It is because as leaders of Christ's church and of our families, the worst we can do is be lukewarm or straddle the fence.

Listen: if your loyalties are split in any way, if God only shares the throne in your heart and in your home, then divisiveness becomes a way of life under your roof. Bad leadership promotes division because if Jesus isn't just Savior but also Lord, then at home your children are faced with an irreconcilable dilemma: trying to make sense of what they hear at church and a materialistic lifestyle or bad language or anger management issues at home.

Bad leadership promotes division because we refuse to forgive past grievances of family members, just like Jeroboam and Rehoboam. On page 199 of *The Story*, it says:

There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

And two paragraphs later:

There was war between Abijah and Jeroboam throughout Abijah's lifetime.

Solomon's problem became Rehoboam's problem, which became Abijah's problem. But the whole time, because these guys were the pilots, it was also Israel's problem. The whole country suffered because of these bad leaders, just like many of your families suffered growing up because bad leadership. If you and I are not peacemakers, how will our kids learn any other way?

Bad leadership promotes division because when fathers and husbands and CEOs and captains and managers and pilots can't resolve issues, who will model godly leadership for the followers?

Third...if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times....

3. Jeroboam: Bad leadership originates in fear.

Most common leadership disease we've seen so far in Aaron, Jacob, Gideon, Saul, and all the rest is fear. And now, once again in Chapter 14, we see the skeletal remains of fear-based leadership. Look at the middle of page 196 in *The Story*....

Out of fear, fear of a loss of control, Jeroboam built shrines for people to worship, because he cared more for his ego than for his people. Look again at the last phrase in that section:

Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. Does this sound familiar at all? Do you remember who said those exact words at the base of Mt. Sinai while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments? Aaron! Out of fear, Jeroboam managed to quote Aaron verbatim. He quoted a man who was also driven by fear because the people were getting restless about Moses' absence.

In the strongest terms I can say, let me encourage you to never, ever lead from fear. From this lectern you and I have discussed example after example of men who are driven by fear.

We've talked about the nuclear physicist who beats his wife black and blue because he is afraid of facing the possibility that he might someday be wrong about something. We've talked about the youth pastor who keeps pornography in his nightstand, so that he can look at it before he makes love to his wife because he's afraid he can't perform otherwise. We've talked about the boss who fires employees because he equates discussion with disloyalty—a boss who fears dialogue because, just like the physicist, he may discover he's not right about everything.

Fear will shred a man's senses and put him on a downward spiral that can become unrecoverable. And since we're already using aviation analogies today, let's also consider the crash of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s airplane in 1999. In that accident, the NTSB determined that the probable cause was Kennedy's failure to maintain control of the plane during a descent over water at night, which was a result of "spatial disorientation" [*define*]. Translation: he didn't trust his instruments. He was overcome by fear. That irreversible downward spiral that took his life will take yours as well, if you are driven by fear and STOP TRUSTING YOUR INSTRUMENTS [*hold up The Story*].

And there's your Equipping Point for today:

Never stop trusting your instruments.

There will always be times when you don't see the horizon—when you can't tell up from down—when the enemy has confused you in the darkness. But never forget there are anchors you can always depend on: the love of God, the promises of His word, the presence of His Spirit, and the support of your brothers here. All of us go through "spiritual disorientation"—and the way to stay solid in your leadership is to remember to trust your instruments.

4. Jeroboam: Bad leadership always involves deception.

Look at the middle of page 197...

Is there any deception in your life? By that I don't just mean getting caught in a bald-faced lie, or with your hand deep in the cookie jar. I also mean this:

- **Have you asked anyone to shade the truth for you recently?**
- **Do you habitually tell only part of the truth?**

So let me ask again: **Where are you proceeding to?** I've had several conversations with people over the last few weeks. Some are playing with fire—they understand they are playing both ends against the middle, that they're trying to live their lives so that this part is unaware of a different part, a sinful part, a part that would collapse their world and crash their plane if anyone found out. I don't know, maybe the thrill of the danger of being caught is somehow intoxicating in a stupid kind of way, but, as the saying goes, their aircraft is simply proceeding to the crash site.

This is a new year. You may have made some good resolutions already. It's one week into 2009, and you may still be going to Lifetime Fitness, or wearing a Nicotine patch. But what we've discussed this morning is so much more important. This whole year it's all about taking the responsibility of leading your family, your employees, and anyone you influence well.

And if everything we've said today hasn't been enough, consider the last Scripture on your outline. It's on page 198 of *The Story*, and found in 1 Kings 14:

He will abandon Israel because Jeroboam sinned and made all of Israel sin along with him.

1 Kings 14:16

Such is the tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of a leader. If that doesn't sober you up, nothing will. Your influence is unstoppable. Whether we like it or not, as leaders in our families, our companies, our communities, and our churches, wherever we go, they go.

You may remember in Chapter 10 that Eli the High Priest was judged because his sons, both priests themselves, were abusing their position and seducing women at the entrance to the Temple. That's not even an old story—we've heard a lot about priests and seduction in the last several years haven't we? The Bible says God will judge not just the perpetrators, but the leaders over them. One of the greatest burdens of leadership is that we will be judged by God because of sin we know about but fail to restrain. [Quote *Isaiah 9:16-17*]

But it doesn't have to be this way! In the leadership roles God has given every person in this room, in 2009, we can take those who follow us to new heights of trust and faith in an unstable world. Where you go, they will go.

If you've been flying recklessly, use this time of new resolutions to stop and think: where are you proceeding? Are you fueled by the Holy Spirit, or has it been a while since you checked the tanks? Are you playing with fire and singeing your family in the process?

My prayer is that you will trust your instruments. My prayer is that you will trust your brothers around you, right here, with both your victories and your weaknesses, so that like Joshua and Aaron held up Moses' arms when he was tired, we can hold each other up. That's what has always set this particular Bible study apart, and I promise to do that for you if you'll be there for me. My prayer is that in 2009, our rendezvous is not at a crash site, but at a party: a celebration of freedom from fear, rescue from insecurity, and a simultaneous arrival for all of us, and those we lead, on a runway that lands at the feet of Jesus.

Chapter 15: Seeing the Forest for the Trees

Lower Story

Upper Story

The raven feeds Elijah

Miraculous victory/overwhelming odds

Conquest in enemy territory

40 days in desert before commissioning

Passing baton of leadership

Ascension to heaven

Successor demonstrates mantle/miracles

Both stretched out over death

Resurrection of first-born son

Healing of Naaman

Wash in the Jordan as obedience

Grace replaces death to Arameans

Covenant signified by meal

Angels surrounded Elisha

Enemies blinded

Hosea marries prostitute

Hosea buys her back

Today's Equipping Point

It's time we stepped up and _____.

It's time we stepped up and _____.

It's time we stepped up and _____.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Corinthians 2:9

Four Questions

1. _____?

2. _____?

3. _____?

4. _____?

Table Discussion (use the four questions above)

Teaching Script

I know it's overused and very familiar, but when it comes to parables about seeing the big picture, nothing comes close to the story of The Blind Men and the Elephant.

- Felt the leg, like a tree
- Felt the trunk, like a snake
- Felt the ear, like a fan
- Felt the side, like a wall
- Felt the tail, like a rope
- Felt the tusk, like a spear

You can draw many lessons from this, but the one we need to concentrate on this morning is understanding the broad view. Each blind man only examined part of the elephant, and drew conclusions based on limited data, when in fact the reality was more than the sum of all the parts.

As we come to Chapter 15 of *The Story*, Israel was much like these blind men. To use our imagery from last week, they were flying along, uninformed, untrained, and unaware that they were low on fuel. Somebody needed to wake everyone up. Somebody needed to break through this empty-headedness and help Israel see that they were steadily proceeding to the crash site.

But how to break through? How big of a 2x4 was going to be needed to get their attention? Israel needed to be sobered up, and fast. So in Chapter 15 of *The Story*, God sent messengers—prophets—to jolt them out of their stupor and kick them in their collective butt.

These prophets, from Elijah to Elisha to Amos to Hosea, all said and did startling things to get through to the people. But as we go through these events, I want you to watch them not just from ground level, but also from blimp level. Listen to these individual stories (don't fill in the chart just yet), but also see what happens as if you're watching a parade from a hot-air balloon. Because what we'll see isn't just the trees, but more importantly, the forest. Not just the Lower Story, but the all-encompassing Upper Story of God.

Elijah was first, and he warned Ahab that Israel would experience a 3-year drought because of their worship of the pagan god, Baal. Ahab had even built a temple for Baal in the capital city of Samaria. As the land shriveled up, it seemed a fitting picture of Israel's desiccated hearts and shrunken worship.

And then, the gauntlet was thrown down. Atop Mount Carmel, the supposed sacred dwelling place of Baal, Elijah challenged the idolaters to the ultimate Smackdown—YHWH vs. Baal. Of course, Baal failed to show up but the LORD made a dramatic statement when He consumed the water-logged sacrifice with fire. Elijah then put to death the 450 prophets of Baal. Ahab's wife Jezebel then threatened to kill him, so Elijah fled into the desert. God cared for him there, and encouraged him to get some sleep and eat a couple of good meals. After that, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Mount Horeb. God revealed Himself there to Elijah, much like He had done nearly 600 years

earlier to Moses at Sinai. He told Elijah that he had kings and prophets to anoint—one of whom was his successor, Elisha. Once again, as with Moses and Joshua, God was passing the baton to the next generation of leaders who would speak for Him.

While the two prophets were traveling together, Elijah parted the Jordan by striking the water with his cloak—another throwback to Moses. As they continued on, a whirlwind took Elijah up to heaven in a chariot of fire. The cloak fell to Elisha whose authority was confirmed when he too divided the Jordan. Similar to Elijah before him, Elisha performed many miraculous feats for the benefit of Israel. He promised a barren Shunammite woman a son. When the boy suddenly died years later, Elisha brought him back to life.

Later, when the Aramean king sent his troops to capture this man of God, Elisha prayed and asked God to open his servant's eyes so he could see the angels who were standing guard around them, and to blind the Arameans. Elisha then led his captives to Samaria where he asked the king of Israel to prepare a feast of friendship in lieu of execution. This unconventional act of grace established peace between Israel and Aram.

But even then—even with the powerful ministries of Elijah and Elisha, the idolaters remained numerous and unrepentant. So God sent Amos, a herdsman from the southern kingdom of Judah, to warn the northern kingdom of Israel that her prosperity, injustice and sinful ways would soon be judged. He promised them that if Israel did not repent, they would be taken captive. God also sent Hosea as a living object lesson of His faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. He was told to marry Gomer, an unfaithful woman who, after bearing his children, hit as many night spots and gin joints as she could squeeze into an evening. But Israel still refused to hear the pleas of God to return to Him.

This is the Lower Story of Chapter 15—the retelling of the events as they happened. But now we want to see the forest, not just the trees. We want to see these events in light of the over-arching Upper Story of God. There are few chapters where each incident has so much meaning and each Lower Story episode carries so much symbolism as they herald God's great Upper Story. Consider Chapter 15 from the Goodyear blimp:

THE STORY

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON GUIDE

Lower Story

The raven feeds Elijah
Miraculous victory/overwhelming odds
Conquest in enemy territory
40 days in desert before commissioning
Passing baton of leadership
Ascension to heaven
Successor demonstrates mantle/miracles
Both stretched out over death
Resurrection of first-born son
Healing of Naaman
Wash in the Jordan as obedience
Grace replaces death to Arameans
Covenant signified by meal
Angels surrounded Elisha
Enemies blinded
Hosea marries prostitute
Hosea buys her back

Upper Story

God provides
The Cross: the victory of defeat
Jesus came to the world
40 days in desert before commissioning
“You shall be my witnesses...”
Ascension to heaven
Acts of the Apostles
Jesus stretched out over death
Resurrection of first-born son
Salvation for Gentiles also
Baptism a sign of obedience
Grace replaces death for all mankind
Lord's Supper
Legions of angels available to Jesus
“Seeing they do not see...”
Israel committed adultery against God
Jesus purchased us back

The Upper Story of God literally SHOUTS through this chapter! The day-to-day Lower Story of walking in the wilderness and preparing meals for your enemies and staying faithful in a marriage mean so much more than you'd think. God is always telling His Upper Story of redemption and compassion through His messengers. As we've said from the very beginning of this study, every story of the Old Testament whispers the name of Jesus—every story points to Him in some form or fashion.

God called these prophets at a critical time in Israel's history. Again, look at the big picture: The legacy of the monarchy was an undignified mess, and the good king to bad king ratio was awful. The sins of the leaders had literally split the kingdom, spawned fratricidal and incestuous warfare, and made the chosen people of God a spectacle to the rest of the world. Into this fray, this fracas, this melee, God sent the prophets. They certainly had their work cut out for them.

And now for the punch line, the application.

I submit that God has called you and I to the same mission. Are we not called to take up the mantle of “messenger” today in the riotous, corrupt culture of the 21st century? Today, whether it's in finance or politics, our good leader to bad leader ratio is awful. Our standing in the world even as Christians has been diminished considerably. Our churches have split, fought amongst themselves, and more than a few religious leaders have made Christianity a spectacle.

Isn't it time for some truth-telling? Contrary to popular belief, the word “prophet” does not mean “fortune-teller” but “truth teller.” Prophets speak the truth even when it's unpopular to do so. From Elijah and Elisha to Amos to John the Baptist, they told it the way it was, regardless of the cost.

And gentlemen, it's time we stepped up.

And there's your Equipping Point for today:

Step up to the plate.

Get in the batters' box and swing away. Or if you prefer a golf analogy, address the ball and trust your swing. [*Begin backswing and “Oops” at top.*]

But I want you to know I'm working on my swing. I'm working on being able to walk up and trust my swing and disregard my fear for the people on the adjacent fairway.

And in all seriousness, it's time we stepped up as God's Messengers.

Write these down:

It's time we stepped up and spoke up.

It's time we stepped up and *lived out our high calling*.

It's time we stepped up and *modeled some grace*.

But here's the key: if we get lost in the Lower Story of our lives, the daily grind of putting bread on the table and paying the bills, rather than the big picture—missing the forest for the trees—we cannot be the prophets, the truth-tellers, of our time.

This side-by-side comparison this morning from this extraordinary chapter is to help us see that God is doing much more in your life than you'd ever expect. Just as Elijah's 40 days in the wilderness, Elisha healing Naaman, and Hosea's troubled marriage pointed to something more, so your life means so much more than you think. Your life points to a reality and a purpose far beyond what you could possibly imagine, but that's not always easy to remember in the midst of the storm. God is working this one, timeless, Upper Story not just in Elijah and Hosea, but also in your life.

Remember how Paul encouraged some of the first Christians who were under immense persecution:

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. 1 Corinthians 2:9

God is doing everything He can to get through to you in the circumstances of your life, to help you see the forest, get a bird's eye view, and realize the same Upper Story we have marveled at this morning is the Upper Story that permeates your life.

- Are you unemployed? Perhaps the Upper Story is for you to see God as the provider rather than yourself. If God is the provider of your salvation, and conquered death to do so, is daily bread for your family too hard for the one who feeds the sparrows?
- Are you underemployed? The Upper Story could be that God is teaching you submission, like Jesus, in preparation for a future role you couldn't imagine where humility will really be needed.
- Are you in bondage to pornography, despite your desire to quit? Perhaps the message of the Upper Story is that God will continue to love you and pursue you into the red-light district, just as he did Hosea's wife.
- Are you stuck in a difficult marriage? It could be the Upper Story for you is to remember that God pursued unloving, unappreciative Israel for centuries, and that your prayers for your spouse matter greatly.

And so, here are a few questions to ask yourself to see where God might be trying to break through to you with His Upper Story. I'm just going to ask these four questions and then pause. You can write them down if you'd like, but more than anything I just want you to think about them in light of God and His Upper Story in your life:

- 1. What is your "thorn in the flesh"—your intractable struggle? Why would God not have removed it by now?**
- 2. What area of your life most needs a peacemaker?**

3. **Remember Elisha and the Arameans? What long-term adversary would be completely blown away by an act of grace on your part?**
4. **How much of a relief would it be to lay aside just one grievance for good and be done with it? And which grievance would that be?**

It's so easy to get lost in the weeds—in the Lower Story of details, resentments, in the mess and chaos of daily life. But if we are to be the truth-tellers of our generation, let's resolve to see the big picture, and commit to praying for God to reveal the Upper Story in our lives. Let's resolve to step back and get some perspective. Let's resolve to make it our mission to display Christianity as a deliverance from a life of bondage, rather than a weapon to beat people up with. Let's resolve to speak the truth in love to a bewildered, dazed world that doesn't just need to be sobered up, but needs to hear a message of grace, hope, and freedom. A world that needs a Savior.

[Prayer]

Lord, release us from the prison of pride and bitterness, and open our eyes that we may see the host of angels surrounding us, your provision during drought, and fulfill our destiny as truth-tellers and peacemakers in a world sorely in need of both.

Show us the way out of the weeds, and help us see your timeless plan, the great Upper Story, in OUR lives.

By ourselves, we couldn't even lift the bat. But through Your power, help us step up as your messengers, that we might be your witnesses under our roofs, in our marketplace, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Chapter 16: Postcards from the Edge

1. God wants to use you in His plans, but He doesn't _____.

The LORD has rejected the people of Israel because they have made alliances with foreigners from the East who practice magic and divination, just like the Philistines. Israel has vast treasures of silver and gold and many horses and chariots. The land is filled with idols. The people bow down and worship these things they have made. So now everyone will be humbled and brought low. The LORD cannot simply ignore their sins! Crawl into caves in the rocks. Hide from the terror of the LORD and the glory of his majesty. The day is coming when your pride will be brought low and the LORD alone will be exalted. In that day the LORD Almighty will punish the proud, bringing them down to the dust.

Isaiah 2:6-12

2. Your enemies will always lure you toward the _____.

3. *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Matthew 7:13-14

Look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

Matthew 7:13-14, MSG

Some trust in their war chariots and others in their horses, but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

Psalms 20:7

4. What moves the hand of God: _____ and _____.

In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them. He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary. Our ancestors were unfaithful and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They abandoned the LORD and his Temple; they turned their backs on him. These men called together their fellow Levites, and they purified themselves. Then they began to purify the Temple of the LORD, just as the king had commanded. They were careful to follow all

the LORD's instructions in their work. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Temple of the LORD to cleanse it, and they took out to the Temple courtyard all the defiled things they found.

2 Chronicles 29:3ff

5. Despite this miracle, Judah was still taken into _____.

a. _____ against God (Isa. 1:2-3)

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

Isaiah 1:2-3

b. Empty _____

"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Isaiah 1:11,13

c. _____ injustice

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her — but now murderers! Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.

Isaiah 1:21, 23

6. We have much to learn about _____ as fathers.

Today's Equipping Point

***Become fathers that show _____
mercy.***

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you been tempted to take the easy road?
2. What do you need to purify?
3. What's the difference between unconditional mercy and enabling someone's misbehavior?

Teaching Script

[Review splitting of kingdoms, messengers from last week.]

Now, this is the beginning of the end of the Northern Kingdom. For 209 years, the northern kingdom had endured one evil king after another. Their failure to keep God's covenant meant that they would be expelled from the covenant. They had been chosen to be a blessing to all other nations, but now they would now be delivered over to the very nations that compromised them.

Sure enough, the Assyrian army destroyed the capital city of Samaria and deported the Israelites throughout Assyria. This dispersion guaranteed that the Northern Kingdom would never again be a nation. But even here, on the brink of their extinction as a nation, there are key lessons about God's timeless Upper Story. And so our lesson this morning is entitled, "Postcards from the Edge"—lessons from the precipice.

1. God wants to use you in His plans, but He doesn't *have to*.

From this point forward, the nation of Israel was history, and they only had themselves to blame. Listen to Isaiah 2:

The LORD has rejected the people of Israel because they have made alliances with foreigners from the East who practice magic and divination, just like the Philistines. Israel has vast treasures of silver and gold and many horses and chariots. The land is filled with idols. The people bow down and worship these things they have made. So now everyone will be humbled and brought low. The LORD cannot simply ignore their sins! Crawl into caves in the rocks. Hide from the terror of the LORD and the glory of his majesty. The day is coming when your pride will be brought low and the LORD alone will be exalted. In that day the LORD Almighty will punish the proud, bringing them down to the dust.

Isaiah 2:6-12

Jesus needs people to do His work in the world, but the choice is ours to make. Our first takeaway this morning is that it is a privilege to be included by God and used in His kingdom, but it's never a given. He owes us nothing. And should we continue to choose our own selfish way, God will, in the end, grant that wish. Let us take our first lesson this morning from what used to be the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and make sure we're fully on board.

Meanwhile, just to the south in the kingdom of Judah, godly King Hezekiah was nervously watching these world-shaking events on his northern border. Hezekiah stands out from all of the other kings of Judah for his efforts to remove every vestige of idolatry in the land. He rebelled against the new Assyrian king Sennacherib. The Assyrians sent envoys, claiming that they wanted to negotiate a peaceful surrender with Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Their reasoning was faultless: What other nation had been able to stand against the Assyrian might? Had not the Northern Kingdom already fallen? Sennacherib's commander appealed directly to the populace of Jerusalem speaking to them in Hebrew.

2. Your enemies will always taunt you toward the *path of least resistance*.

Their reasoning will be sound, and it will be tempting to give in. It will sound rational, and it usually will be the easiest option...

Stolen water is sweet... (Prov. 9)

There's a reason Solomon talks so much about sloth in Proverbs. You remember we talked a few weeks ago about the "sluggard" or lazy person as a man of wasted potential. Satan would like nothing more than for you to squander your efforts and take the path of least resistance. But listen to Jesus on the subject:

*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is **easy** that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Matthew 7:13-14

Or, as the Message puts it:

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

Matthew 7:13-14 MSG

King Hezekiah trusted in the LORD and prayed for deliverance. The easy road would have been to give in to the twisted logic of Sennacherib's argument—to just capitulate—hey, maybe we'll save some lives in the process.

But that would be a response without faith. The prophet Isaiah promised that God would deliver them. Perhaps as he surveyed the army surrounding them, Hezekiah remembered the words of King David:

Some trust in their war chariots and others in their horses, but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

Psalms 20:7

I submit to you this morning that just when hope seems lost, just when it seems darkest, just when your own war-gaming runs out of options, THAT is precisely the point where faith begins. The same faith that led Hezekiah to purge the land of idols is the faith that led him to trust that 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were no match for the Lord. You can have your horses, your chariots, your artillery—but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

You know, I'm guessing is that some of us need to say this out loud this morning. It may be a season of unemployment or economic pressure...a season of conflict in your marriage...a season of uncertainty or transition...or maybe it's just a dry season...a desert sojourn where God seems very far away and even your most sincere prayers ring hollow. Maybe, like Hezekiah, you feel under siege. If so, you need to say this out loud.

It's one thing to read a Scripture, nod, and reflect on its philosophical truth (hmmm, that's a good thought...). It's another to say it out loud and make it your own. As they say,

you've got to name it if you're going to claim it. So put an asterisk on your outlines and clear your throats...ready?

And what happened the next morning? The angel of the LORD had swept through the Assyrian camp much like God had swept through Egypt centuries ago, and all those horses and chariots didn't amount to a hill of beans. Sometimes, you just need to declare it out loud, and make God's truth your own.

The third Postcard from the Edge:

3. We see what moves the hand of God: *prayers and purity*.

Hezekiah was an abnormality, an exception to the line of the kings of Judah. He was faithful to remove every remnant of their idolatry, and *purify* the people by pointing them back to the one true God. And so the Lord heard his prayers and delivered Judah from the fate of the Northern Kingdom.

This is really important, so I want us to read this carefully:

In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them. He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary. Our ancestors were unfaithful and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They abandoned the LORD and his Temple; they turned their backs on him.

These men called together their fellow Levites, and they purified themselves. Then they began to purify the Temple of the LORD, just as the king had commanded. They were careful to follow all the LORD's instructions in their work. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Temple of the LORD to cleanse it, and they took out to the Temple courtyard all the defiled things they found.

2 Chronicles 29:3ff

What, if anything, is hindering your prayers? The very first place to look is within—is there sin in the camp? Remember Achan in the book of Joshua? Achan had personally taken spoils from one of the battles and hid them in his tent. When Israel was defeated at what should have been an easy victory, Joshua understood there was an unconfessed sin that caused God to remove His hand from their victory march. The impurity was rooted out, and Achan and his family and the spoils were stoned and then burned outside the camp.

Which leads to another point: I want you to notice something huge about this purity issue. God didn't stop just answering Achan's prayers because he had sinned—the entire nation of Israel was stopped in their march to conquer the Promised Land because of this man's sin, and his entire family paid the price with him.

Are there unconfessed strongholds of the enemy that you have not surrendered? Is there impurity in your camp? The Bible tells us that unconfessed impurity and strongholds of sin affect not just you, but everyone you influence: our family suffers when we don't deal with our own weaknesses.

But...but...look at what's available to you when you purify your hearts and make a request to God: armies of 185,000 enemies fall dead at your feet and victory is given to those who come clean, confess their sin, and get their hearts in order.

Are you in need of one of these Hezekiah miracles today? Have you been praying and praying for relief? We have ample evidence here of what moves the hand of God: His people's purity and prayers.

4. **Despite this miracle, Judah was still taken into captivity.**

Over and over again, we've seen how huge warning signs are disregarded—how the fate of one group of people does nothing to sober up the people who watched the train wreck. You'd think that sooner or later Israel would see the consequences and learn something. It's kind of like those horrific pictures they show you in driver's education of the mangled, bloody remains of those who don't wear their seat belt or who drink and drive. The pictures are supposed to scare you into compliance.

But somehow, those lessons always seem lost on God's chosen people. The northern tribes were taken captive to Assyria to serve as an example to Judah, but the object lesson failed.

Isaiah was sent to tell them they had blown their chance and the first chapter of his book gives us the three key problems God saw in their hearts:

a. **Rebellion against God** ("You are not God to me.")

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

Isaiah 1:2-3

b. **Empty religion**

The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Isaiah 1:11,13

c. **Social injustice**

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her— but now murderers! Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.

Isaiah 1:21, 23

Notice the natural progression. Rebellion against God will inevitably lead to empty worship. God will not be mocked. It is an abomination to worship God with insincerity, and to go through the motions with an unpurified heart. And what follows? The social structure just disintegrates into chaos. Why? Because self-centered people oppress and mistreat others; only God-centered people love and serve others.

This is why Hezekiah's acts of purification, repentance, and confession were so important. He had led the way, but as soon as he was gone, that failure of purity caused rebellion, empty worship, and social injustice. It all ties together.

5. We have much to learn about mercy as fathers.

God spared the Southern Kingdom from Assyrian takeover, knowing that in just a short amount of time, they would reject Him once more. It was déjà vu all over again.

Know this morning that even if you mess up again, God will provide a way of escape—you *can still return*. This is very opposite to human tendencies—if I knew my daughter was about to totally disregard the grace I was about to show, I'd be reluctant to give it. But we cannot miss the huge point in this chapter that even though He has perfect knowledge, and knows precisely when we will sin again, God still grants us forgiveness and mercy and deliverance from 185,000 enemies, despite our fickleness and two-timing, two-faced nature.

So let's make that our **Equipping Point for today:**

Let's take a page from the mercy of a God who delivers us despite our imminent betrayal, and become fathers that show unconditional mercy.

Do you have so much of the Holy Spirit living in you that you could forgive and speak graciously your children if you knew tomorrow they'd do it again? Can we today overcome our human tendency to keep a ledger of wrongs for the next time our kids or our wives trip up?

If God can deliver Judah from an army of Assyrians just before they turned their backs on Him again, if He can forgive me from my self-centeredness, then I can show mercy to my children, who are destined to disappoint me tomorrow.

How is this possible? How does my cheating, unfaithful heart get a new chance every day? How are His mercies new every morning? How can Paul say there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus?

Isaiah tells us how. He tells us about a Servant who will suffer in order to make us whole. And so, as we close this morning, let's listen with fresh ears to the matchless 53rd chapter of Isaiah. Would you stand in reverence for Scripture as we read (from *The Story* beginning on page 228...).

How can His mercies be new every morning? That's how...that's how God can forgive me today as if I'd never sinned yesterday. That's how I learn about mercy as a father—by understanding what the Suffering Servant did for me. That's how I guard against empty religion: who could not fall at the feet of this man? That's how I overcome apathy to the

great social needs of today: if this Jesus would assume this humiliation and pain for all of humanity, are they not worthy of my attention as well? That's how I avoid the sin of Achan, the encroachment of impurity in my life: to stand in awe of what it cost this man to reconcile me to God.

It may have been the beginning of the end of Israel. But in God's great Upper Story, when Isaiah describes a humble Savior's obedience, it's not the beginning of the end. Quite the opposite: He is the beginning of our eternity.

[Prayer]

Lord we have heard Hezekiah's call to purification—please cleanse us from our impurities.

I pray for the men in this room today who are on the edge—on the precipice, running low on hope, hearing our common enemy tempting us with the easy way out. Show us more than the horses and chariots that seem to surround us. Show us the same angels that delivered Elisha, the same angels that conquered the Assyrian army, ready to deliver, to save, to stand watch over us. Today we proclaim again that we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

In the name of the One whose wounds have healed us,

Chapter 17: All's Lost, All's Found

The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 9:9-10

The law was three-fold in purpose:

- _____ — to teach Israel to be a holy nation
- _____ — reveals the nature and character of God and sin
- _____ — demonstrated the need for a Savior

But something more was needed...

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...

Hebrews 7:18-19

If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it.

Hebrews 8:7

Jeremiah

“The day will come,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD.

“But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day,” says the LORD. “I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their family, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will already know me,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness and will never again remember their sins.”

Jeremiah 31”31-34

Ezekiel

“For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command.”

Ezekiel 36:24-27

That old system of law etched in stone led to death, yet it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. Shouldn't we expect far greater glory when the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old covenant, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new covenant, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:7-10

Old Covenant

Law brought awareness of sin
Carved on tablets of stone
Time-sensitive, limited atonement
Sinful High Priest
Externally based
A response of fear
Passover looks back to bitterness/slavery
Letter of the law kills
Stopgap/patchwork

New Covenant

New brought freedom from sin
Written with the Spirit on human hearts
Eternal purging of sins
Timeless, perfect High Priest
Internally based—matter of the heart
A response of gratitude
Passover looks back & forward
Spirit gives life
Turnkey/seamless

And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. This is the new, life-giving way that Christ has opened up for us through the sacred curtain, by means of his death for us. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's people, let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:19-22

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God sometimes let things fall so far before a word of hope?
2. How dark has your place of loneliness, separation, or captivity been?
3. How has God put you back together again?

Teaching Script

[Top 10 Good Things About Turning 50]

Northern Kingdom captured, Southern Kingdom delivered, but Hezekiah died and they returned to their evil ways. They learned nothing from their own miraculous rescue. Hezekiah's son Manasseh ascended to the throne and unraveled his father's spiritual heritage. His reign marked a spiritual relapse from which the kingdom of Judah would not recover. One of his most detestable practices was the subversion and ruin of the sacrificial system. He set up altars in the LORD's temple to Baal, to the stars, and worst of all, an altar where his own son was burned in the fire. This degradation of the sacrificial system is important—we're going to return to it in a minute.

As a result God's people would not return to Him. So God did what He said He would do—He sent foreign armies to raid Judah. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar laid three sieges against Judah and Jerusalem. The king and the prophet, Ezekiel, were among their prisoners. Ezekiel went along to speak truth to the exiles who disregarded their guilt, even when faced with such stern judgment.

In the last of the attacks, in 586 BC, the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They demolished the city, looted the temple and led the people away to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who were left behind.

Now that we've set the stage, remember Manasseh and his perversion of the offerings. It's critical to look at the prescribed sacrifices of the OT because this is the **key** to seeing the big picture, the Upper Story of Chapter 17.

This pattern of animal, grain, and drink offerings was instituted as a temporary means of atoning for sin, cleansing the people from the impurities that separated them from their God. They were necessary to present the Jews as holy to the holy God who made them, but they were not designed to be a permanent system.

The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. (Hebrews 9:9-10.)

The law served as a way that God's people could demonstrate their allegiance and obedience to the LORD. They were three-fold in purpose:

- Regulatory—to teach Israel to be a holy nation, and respond to the LORD as such.
- Revelatory—reveals the nature and character of a holy God and reveals sin.
- Preparatory—demonstrated the need for a Savior

They'd never done very well. They wanted to return to the gods of Egypt and build golden calves while their sandals were still soggy from the bottom of the Red Sea. Israel's history, as we have seen through *The Story*, is fraught with her continued failure to remain in obedience to the Law.

The righteousness of the LORD compelled Him to send warnings to Israel to return to a covenant relationship with Him—just as you would plead with an unfaithful spouse to heed her promises. He revealed Himself through deliverance from enemies, through prophets (such as Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah), and through miraculous events like the ten plagues, Elijah's 3-year drought, and the showdown on Mt. Carmel. Yet it was never enough to keep Israel in the fairway.

Approximately 850 years after the LORD gave Moses the Law, Judah went into captivity, about 125 years after the Northern tribes. This nation in possession of the Promised Land was now expelled from the Land by their own doing, and by God's permission.

Exiled into foreign nations and cast out of the Land of their inheritance, they were destitute. They had every possible advantage to become holy and to live up to their high calling. They had been redeemed; they had seen and experienced the miracles and acts of the LORD; they had His written word; they had the Covenant of the Law. Yet the sin nature reigned mightier than all these other things put together. If Israel couldn't cut it with all these advantages, then what hope was there for anyone? If the Covenant of the Law wasn't enough, what would it take?

Something more was needed...

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...

Hebrews 7:18-19

If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it.

Hebrews 8:7

Israel had failed over and over, but the key was not to lower the standards—God couldn't do that and still be God. The question was this: how to make the work of God more intimate and personal to each believer? To move closer, to take the next step toward the humanity He created? The current system was patchwork.

Think of an office system. Before automation, you had to print off a document, go feed it into the copier, staple each set of copies, then hole-punch each set, and then bind them together. Now a seamless office system running on a central server can do all of the copying, stapling, collating, and binding from your desk.

Like in the days before computers, Judah could not imagine that God would have an outside-of-the-box answer for their problem.

Think for a moment of all the things that have become obsolete over the years.

I want you to be honest: How many of you still have vinyl records at home? Worse than that, how many of you still have 8-tracks? Then there were cassette tapes, and reel-to-reel, then CDs, and now songs have no physical properties whatsoever: they're just a stream of 1's and 0's on an MP3 file in an iPOD.

I can remember getting on my knees and thanking God for Liquid Paper in college, you know, hip deep in a 20-page term paper. Would any of us like to return to a manual, patchwork system? Of course not. Why? Because the new is infinitely better than the old.

That's why we just can't miss this amazing chapter in *The Story*. At perhaps the lowest point in Israel's life, one kingdom was gone and a second was on the way to captivity. Judah was experiencing the discipline of the LORD for their failure to live by the Old Covenant when God promised a future covenant that would be everlasting. All Judah could see was their "lower story" circumstances: captivity, slavery, and humiliation...the consequences of generations of bad choices.

And so, into this devastation, into this spiritual wasteland, into this most unexpected place and time, came a word of hope from Jeremiah to the few left in Jerusalem:

"The day will come," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the LORD.

"But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their family, saying, 'You should know the LORD.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will already know me," says the LORD. "And I will forgive their wickedness and will never again remember their sins."

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Then, at about the same time in Babylon, smack in the middle of the stench of subjection and indignity, a prophet named Ezekiel says something eerily similar:

"For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command."

Ezekiel 36:24-27

Even in the midst of almost total darkness, the stunning Upper Story of God cannot be extinguished, smothered or constrained! Into the most unlikely and desperate of situations, through Jeremiah AND Ezekiel, God speaks His life-giving word of renewal and irrational hope. You really cannot miss the wonder of His timing here. But that's not all!

Here's the really cool part: this New Covenant spoken of is infinitely better because it deals once and for all with sin.

In business terms, it's a seamless process where we turn to a sole supplier. We put our faith in Him, and in the ultimate turnkey operation, He does everything: He creates the avenue back to Him, He provides the enduring sacrifice, He seals us with His Spirit, and holds us in His hand until we're glorified with Him. This is a fool-proof, ISO-9000 inspected, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award process—and it's all for us! No more bulls, goats, rams or lambs—just God Himself, re-engineering everything from access to forgiveness to redemption. That, gentlemen, is a God worthy of our worship!

The sin problem is a heart problem. But now, instead of an external Law, God's actual nature becomes part of his people because His Spirit lives here. Every time I think about it, it just blows me away!

And how was this accomplished? We found that out last week: the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy, who would remove the need for continual sacrifices, who would inaugurate a new intimacy between the God and His creation—who still required death as a payment for sin, but now would shed His own blood, making obsolete the repetitive slaughter of animals and ordaining a new kind of Passover meal where blood spread over the doorposts of homes was replaced by blood on a different kind of wooden post.

Here's how Paul described the difference when he wrote to the Corinthians:

That old system of law etched in stone led to death, yet it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. Shouldn't we expect far greater glory when the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old covenant, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new covenant, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:7-10

Old Covenant

Law brought awareness of sin
Carved on tablets of stone
Time-sensitive, limited atonement
Sinful High Priest
Externally based
A response of fear
Passover looks back to bitterness/slavery
Letter of the law kills
Stopgap/patchwork

New Covenant

New brought freedom from sin
Written with the Spirit on human hearts
Eternal purging of sins
Timeless, perfect High Priest
Internally based—matter of the heart
A response of gratitude
Passover looks back & forward
Spirit gives life
Turnkey/seamless

And so the result?

And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. This is the new, life-giving way that Christ has opened up for us through the sacred curtain, by means of his death for us. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's people, let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences

have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:19-22

The title of Chapter 17 in *The Story* is “The Kingdom’s Fall.” It is certainly a convicting, sobering time in the history of a nation of such great promise, who had so much going for it, and who, if they’d only asked, had the God of Creation ready to lead them. But still, the kingdom fell, and fell hard. What a tragedy.

But before we leave what would seem to be a downer of a chapter, it’s important to see the Upper Story: during what is arguably the darkest time in the history of Israel, God gives a clear window into a new arrangement so unexpected, so out-of-the-box, so startling and unpredictable, that we can hardly contain it.

God never fails to give hope to the faithful. While the Northern Kingdom was disintegrating, He used Isaiah to tell of a Suffering Servant who would heal us by His wounds. And now, as most of the Southern Kingdom is carted off to Babylon and a small, dejected remainder stays in Jerusalem, He uses Ezekiel and Jeremiah to tell the same astonishing story of a new promise, a new heart, and sins that will never again be remembered.

The last thing for us to take away from this seemingly bankrupt story is that even in the depths of gloom, God still has a promise He is fulfilling. Even in the loneliest circumstances of captivity, as far from home as you are, there is hope.

I suspect some of you today are in the midst of a split—perhaps not of a kingdom, but maybe of a marriage or a working relationship. You are living in a divided world, and as you look back, you can see a lot of things you would have done differently. My message to you is that even in a painful separation, whether it can be repaired or not, God never stops communicating with you. Just like He sent Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah to encourage His people, He loves **you** enough to ensure there are prophets in your life so that even in a desperate state, you’ll still hear His voice.

Maybe today you find yourself in captivity, surrounded by unfriendlies or hostiles, a long way from where you should be. God’s promise to you is that if you repent, exile isn’t forever. God disciplines those He loves, and isolation can be a sobering thing. We’ll see in a couple of chapters that God arranges world events such that Judah can come back and rebuild Jerusalem and the walls, and how He provides for them is no less than amazing. There **IS** a way out, and today if you’re in the dark and can’t see it at all, remember God **listens** to a penitent heart and just as he led Joseph from the dungeon, and brought his people out of Babylon, he hears your voice too.

How do I know? In Babylon, God told Ezekiel that all was not lost—that He would one day cleanse and restore them. To illustrate His point, God pointed to a valley of dry, barren, detached bones and asked, “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel spoke God’s message to the bones, they came to life and stood like a vast army. This astonishing demonstration confirmed that even exile in Babylon would not hinder God’s great Upper Story. God can put you back together in just the same way.

THE STORY

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON GUIDE

And so our title this morning is “All’s lost, all’s found.” Just when you think it’s over, it’s not.

Because the promise is for the faithful—even for those of us in the weeds, for those of us split apart, or in a hostile environment, the promise is that if we turn our hearts, God WILL literally put us back together again...that His hand of blessing would return...and we WILL be resurrected from bodies of dust and sin, to bodies reassembled by God Himself, sprinkled clean, our filth washed away, and a new, obedient heart within, never again to be captive, divided, or separated from His love. In one of the darkest times of the Bible, these are the promises of God. The road has been paved, the sacrifice has been made—let us walk then, as sons of light.

Chapter 18: Faithful Living in a Foreign Land

“Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...Costly grace is the kingly rule of Christ...it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him...Above all, grace is costly because it cost God the life of his Son.”

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

A_____

L_____

I_____

E_____

N_____

All these faithful ones died without receiving what God had promised them, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed the promises of God. They agreed that they were no more than foreigners and nomads here on earth. And obviously people who talk like that are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had meant the country they came from, they would have found a way to go back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a heavenly city for them.

Hebrews 11:13-16

But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.

Philippians 3:20

Dear friends, you are like foreigners and strangers in this world. I beg you to avoid the evil things your bodies want to do that fight against your soul. People who do not believe are living all around you and might say that you are doing wrong. Live such good lives that they will see the good things you do and will give glory to God on the day when Christ comes again.

1 Peter 2:11-12

Today's Equipping Point

Decide who _____ you.

Takeaways

1. Your life really is just a _____ — treat it that way.

We are here for only a moment, visitors and strangers in the land as our ancestors were before us. Our days on earth are like a shadow, gone so soon without a trace.

1 Chronicles 29:15

2. Even in difficult circumstances, God never _____ us.

3. For all the _____ that are taken away from you, there are still some you get to make.

Discussion Questions

1. Which component of A-L-I-E-N challenges you the most?
2. Who defines you?
3. What are your non-negotiables?

Teaching Script

Every once in a while, sometimes every few generations, there is a contemporary story that echoes a Biblical story to such an extent that you just sit back and marvel at both saints.

As we come to Chapter 18 in *The Story*, and the example of how Daniel lived for God in a hostile culture, we also look to a 20th century Daniel, a Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wasn't only a church pastor but a seminary professor as well. He studied the Scriptures diligently, meditated and prayed daily, disciplined young men in seminary, and spoke around the world. As a young man in his twenties and thirties, he sought reformations in the German national church. He defiantly preached against the influence of the Nazis. In the early 1930's, he studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

In 1939, he accepted an offer from them to teach, but he knew that his place was in Germany. So a month later, he returned to Germany to actively resist the cruel power of the Nazi regime, to boldly lead the underground Confessing Church movement. He was arrested in April of 1943. A year later, on April 9, 1944, the 39-year-old Bonhoeffer was hanged in a concentration camp in Flossenbug, Germany. Three days later the camp was liberated by Allied forces.

The Cost of Discipleship is Bonhoeffer's seminal work on what it means to be a follower of Christ. This is one of a handful of books that changed my life. In it, he wrote this quote on your outline:

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ... Costly grace is the kingly rule of Christ... it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him... Above all, grace is costly because it cost God the life of his Son.

Parallels abound between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Daniel. Both understood the Cost of Discipleship, even when it meant living out your faith in a hostile culture, even if it meant resisting the worst kinds of evil at the risk of your own life, even if it meant an underground faith that refused compromise.

And just as Bonhoeffer faced death by resisting the Third Reich, Daniel and his three friends faced death for their resistance of the Babylonian Reich, where much of Judah had been taken captive. And for the 21st century man who has taken up the mission of Christ in his life, who has dethroned himself and taken up the gauntlet to live faithfully in an unfaithful world, there are perhaps no greater role models than Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel.

You might not know these four men were probably teenagers when they arrived in Babylon; but despite their young age, they were faithful to God, even down to the Jewish dietary laws.

You remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream—Daniel's ability to recite it and interpret it really put him on the king's radar—he was promoted, and the king himself worshipped Daniel's God.

But when the king's other advisors played to his pride, he had a gold statue made in his own honor, and everyone was commanded to worship it. When Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego refused, they were thrown into a fiery furnace. But an astonished king watched a fourth man join them as they walked unharmed through the fire.

When Belshazzar became king, he threw a great party, but had the chutzpah to use the holy goblets stolen from Jerusalem's temple. The Lord wrote on the wall: "*Mene mene tekel parsin*," which loosely translated means, "This party is **SO** over." Sure enough, that night, the king died.

The new Persian king liked Daniel too, but was tricked into signing a decree forbidding prayer to anyone except the king, punishable by a night in the lions' den. Daniel, of course, returned to his house and prayed to God. King Darius was forced to throw his trusted servant to the lions, but God saved him, and the King once again worshipped Daniel's God.

We can learn so much from Daniel and his friends and their willingness, like Bonhoeffer, to take a stand in a hostile environment under potentially fatal conditions. In many ways, we can identify with Daniel much more than with Joshua, David, or other OT characters, because Daniel lived where *we* live: in an antagonistic culture that refuses to value what *we* do. But amazingly, without the slightest hint of ethical or religious compromise, Daniel serves as a role model for all of us: as a case study as an ALIEN—a journeyman in a foreign land.

Go through this acrostic one letter at a time...

First, Daniel had good...

Associations

Daniel developed a close community of like-minded faithful friends. It would be hard to overstate the importance of their relationship with each other.

- Together they resisted the lure of unlawful luxuries.
- Together they refused a non-Kosher diet.
- Together they refused to bow down to the golden idol.
- Together they faced the fiery furnace.

When Daniel was promoted, he asked that his friends also be promoted to positions of influence. Their friendship served to strengthen their faith and their resolve in the face of temptation and persecution.

Live Peaceably

Daniel and his friends chose to live peaceably in Babylon. When given food from the king's table, they respectfully asked for an alternative diet and test. Daniel used wisdom and tact when dealing with the king; his insight saved the entire court. Even when the decree was issued that forbade Daniel to pray to His God, he quietly went to his room to pray as usual. He lived peaceably under at least three different administrations.

Third, Daniel never forgot his...

Identity

Immediately after Daniel and his friends were chosen for the king's Academy of Chaldean Culture, the commander assigned them new names. These new names were associated with Babylonian gods. By changing their names, they were now labeled under Babylonian culture. This practice would have encouraged most young men to assimilate themselves and leave their Jewish identities behind—but not these four. The Babylonians could impose outward changes, but they could not change the inward identity of these young men. They held fast to God and their true heritage.

Engage his culture

While Daniel and the others could have refused to participate in the social and political life in Babylon, they did not. Instead, they fully engaged in life where they were exiled. Though aliens, they did not keep to themselves in small Israelite enclaves—they didn't withdraw out of principle. They became fully functioning members of society and more—they became respected leaders in a foreign land! They used their knowledge, wisdom, skills and favor of the LORD.

Non-negotiables

Daniel chose his friends wisely. He lived peaceably in a foreign land. He maintained his identity as a man of God all the while recognizing and respecting the governmental authorities placed over him. But he also knew what was non-negotiable. He and his friends refused the idolatry of bowing down to a graven image. They faced death in the fiery furnace and the lion's den for their faith, without a guarantee that God would save them. But they stood firm anyway, because of their concrete convictions.

The application for us today is inescapable. Do we have as much courage? Just as Daniel and his friends were foreigners in enemy territory, so you and I today are "foreigners" and "sojourners" in this world. When you accepted Christ, your citizenship was changed by God Himself. Your spiritual passport was altered to reflect a new homeland, one that none of us has seen but that we have accepted by faith—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

In Hebrews 11, the great "Hall of Faith" chapter, the author recounted the faith of Abraham and Sarah who lived as aliens in the land of promise but were looking for the city whose architect and builder is God. Then he wrote:

All these faithful ones died without receiving what God had promised them, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed the promises of God. They agreed that they were no more than foreigners and nomads here on earth. And obviously people who talk like that are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had meant the country they came from, they would have found a way to go back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a heavenly city for them.

Hebrews 11:13-16

Later Paul would write,

But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.

Philippians 3:20

Peter echoed the same sentiment, bidding men to a calling higher than themselves:

Dear friends, you are like foreigners and strangers in this world. I beg you to avoid the evil things your bodies want to do that fight against your soul. People who do not believe are living all around you and might say that you are doing wrong. Live such good lives that they will see the good things you do and will give glory to God on the day when Christ comes again.

1 Peter 2:11-12

So let's revisit this acronym and make some observations about our sojourn:

Associations

We were never meant to go it alone. Two years ago, over and over in our study of Proverbs, we saw that God's men were created to live in community—iron sharpens iron. The fact that I have your back and you have mine demonstrates to the world that we are different—that we have been naturalized into a new commonwealth not made with hands. But which community you choose makes all the difference. One of my good friends when we lived in Dallas moved into a sales job last year, and all the company salesmen routinely take their clientele to strip joints and gentleman's clubs. He won't return my calls and his wife is scared spitless for him, because they don't go to their Life Group but he does find time to go other places “for business purposes.” We must choose our associations carefully so that they will help us stand firm.

Live Peaceably

Christians are called to be subject to our government and to be peaceable and considerate. Max recently recruited almost a quarter of a million people to pray for President Obama, because Timothy told us to pray for those in authority so we can live quiet and peaceable lives. If we do not represent Christ to the unbelieving world, who will?

Paul said, “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men*” (Romans 12:18). This also applies to our homes: how much does it depend on you to live at peace with your wife? As the spiritual leader of the home, the ball's in your court. How much does it depend on us to live peaceably with our children? Daniel shows us it's possible to take a stand and resist compromise, but do it not out of intimidation, but because we love more and love better than the world does. “By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you _____.”

Identity

Like Daniel, our identity is in Christ Jesus. We reside in a “foreign land,” but our identity should remain tethered to Christ. I told you a few weeks ago about some of the names my daughter is being called at school—and not just her, but her friends as well. Over and over again, it is my mission as her father to affirm her and assure her that she does not

consist of their labels, just as my Heavenly Father has gone to great lengths to assure me, again and again, that I am NOT what the world says. I tell her she is fearfully and wonderfully made, because God tells me that.

So many men define themselves by what others think of them. My friend in Dallas doesn't want to be considered a prude by his co-workers—their approval matters more than God's approval.

And so our Equipping Point for today is this:

Decide who defines you.

Engage

Engage wherever you are! Engage in the social, political, and daily life of the community in which God places you. Randy is deliberately moving us to an awareness, a compassion, and an impact on our neighborhoods—being Jesus where God has placed you.

Some Christians have withdrawn from the world to protect themselves from its defilement—this could be a monastic monk or a parent who completely isolates their child out of fear of “contamination.” But Jesus did not live that way. His participation in the world did not stain him, and it need not stain us, if we are in Christ. Adapting to the world is not the same as conforming to it. What better way to change a business, a school, a neighborhood, or a nation than to be an engaged “foreigner” whose character is trustworthy and uncorrupted like Daniel's.

And finally, pick your...

Non-negotiables

We have to know what our bottom line is and stand firm in our faith for it. For which things are you willing to draw a line in the sand? For which things are you willing to be persecuted? Or maybe just made fun of? Again, *conformity cannot be in our vocabulary*. I don't know who said it, but it's so true: “If you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything.” We must return to our Equipping Point: ***Decide who defines you.***

Three quick takeaways and we're done:

1. Your life really is just a *layover*—treat it that way.

We are here for only a moment, visitors and strangers in the land as our ancestors were before us. Our days on earth are like a shadow, gone so soon without a trace.

1 Chronicles 29:15

If we accept the world's classification of who we are, if we invest ourselves in building bigger barns, in a corporate scramble, then we're treating this place as the be-all/end-all. Don't fall for that. Your final destination is elsewhere.

2. Even in difficult circumstances, God never abandons us.

The exiles must have been terribly discouraged. Despite all of the prophets' warnings, they were now experiencing the discipline of God for their failures. But even in exile—all alone and in way over your head, God will not abandon you either. He protected Daniel from the mouth of the lion and He protected the three friends from the fiery furnace—remember the fourth person in the furnace? Who could it have been but an angel or God Himself in the furnace with them? What a great picture...even if you find yourself in a fiery furnace, God walks with you.

And third,

3. For all the decisions that are taken away from you, there are still some you get to make.

I've been very convicted by this recently. There are a couple of circumstances in my life right now that absolutely drive me crazy. As much as I'd like to change them, they will not be changed. They are, for now, immovable objects. Those decisions have been taken away from me—I can have no impact right now on those conditions.

But like Daniel, for every circumstance he was not able to choose, there was another choice he could make. And so can I. I can choose to build good associations; I can choose to live peaceably. I can choose to draw my self-worth from God not man; I can choose to engage in my giftedness where I'm permitted. And I can choose the hill upon which I'm willing to die.

May we have the courage to live as ALIENS who belong to a better world. Let us today live up to our true heritage as Men of God.

Following is a long version of the chapter summary that was edited for time:

These four men were likely teenagers when they arrived in Babylon, but despite their young age, they were faithful to God, even down to the Jewish dietary laws. For them, it wasn't legalism, but obedience, and God rewarded them with favor.

It started with the troubled dream of a king. Nebuchadnezzar awoke and demanded not just an explanation of the meaning of the dream, but for the wise men to tell the dream itself - failure to do both was an immediate death sentence. The request was impossible, of course, except that God revealed both the events of the dream and their meaning to Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of a four-layered statue. Its head of gold represented Babylon's might. The remaining layers of silver, bronze, and iron symbolized world empires that had not yet risen to power. Daniel's interpretation satisfied the king and saved his life and the lives of all the magicians and wise men in the kingdom. King Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to ruler over Babylon, made high-level officials of his three friends, and worshipped Daniel's God.

This devotion was only temporary, however, as the king's advisors played to his pride. He built a gold statue in his own honor, and all were commanded to bow down and worship at its feet. Daniel's three friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, who were now Babylonian provincial leaders, were faced with a grim choice: idolatry or death. They refused to bow. The king was enraged and ordered them to be thrown into a fiery furnace. They defied the king's last chance order and chose to remain faithful even in the face of death. The fire was stoked; the young men were bound and thrown into the inferno. An astonished king watched a fourth man join them as they walked unharmed through the fire. And once again the king praised their God.

Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by Belshazzar. King Belshazzar threw a great party, but had the chutzpah and audacity to use the holy goblets they had stolen in the raid of Jerusalem's temple. In the original "handwriting on the wall" warning, the LORD sent him a mysteriously written message that appeared on the stucco of the banquet hall: "*Mene mene tekel parsin*," which loosely translated means, "The party is SO over." Sure enough, that night the Persian army invaded Babylon, killed the king, and Persia became the silver layer in the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of years before.

The new king, Darius of Persia, gave Daniel a promotion. Daniel's rivals were jealous and plotted his death. They deceived Darius into signing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer to anyone except the king. The penalty was a single night stay in a cave of hungry lions. Daniel responded by doing as he had always done. He returned to his house, knelt and prayed. Of course, the king's officials felt "duty bound" to bring such dangerous activity to the king's attention, and Darius was forced to throw his trusted servant to the lions. So the king spent a restless night and rose in the morning to find that Daniel was safe and sound in the lions' den. And the great King of Persia worshipped Daniel's God.

Chapter 19: You CAN Go Home Again, But...

1. You **can** go home again, but remember to _____.
Good things can become the worst enemy of the _____.

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3:8-12

2. You **can** go home again, but there will always be _____.
Eight times the word from God through his prophets was: _____.

Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

Malachi 3:10-11

3. You **can** go home again, but you'll have to adjust your _____.

And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him... So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him, you trust him...

1 Peter 1:5-8

The big question is this:

Will you **choose** to keep your head above the clouds and pray to see the _____?

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a homecoming that fell short of your expectations?
2. Does Jesus dwell more tangibly in your temple today vs. years ago?
3. What does "putting first things first" look like for **you** right now, today?

Teaching Script

Well today, we find ourselves in Chapter 19 of *The Story—The Return Home*. Have you been to any homecomings lately? Last year, I had two homecomings. One was my 30th college reunion in October. I attended a small Christian college in the Midwest with about 300 students total. Most of the people I ran around with weren't there, so I had a weekend to sit and soak, to let the memories wander back as I roamed the campus.

It wasn't easy to go home again. I found out why two of my good friends hadn't returned in a long time—they had both adopted a gay lifestyle, one of them after a difficult marriage and divorce. I also didn't see the teacher that molested me—I had confronted him several years ago when our book was published and forgiven him then; but it would have been an awkward conversation if he'd been there.

Perhaps what troubled me the most was a conversation I did have with a friend who I knew from youth camp even before college. Thirty years ago he was pretty wild. He raised nine kids, slept with more girls than I could count, and bragged about each conquest. But as I talked to him at the reunion, he had changed. He was now what you might call “old school”—it was clear that he had become very legalistic—a man who believed without a doubt that members of his denomination were the only true Christians, and that the only way you could go to heaven was strict conformity to his church's interpretation of the Scriptures. This was his goal in life, he said, to live up to his church's teachings. It struck me as very ironic that the man who needed so much grace as a teenager, was now completely unwilling to give it as an adult.

Sometimes it's not easy to go home again. 2,500 years ago, God's people had been taken captive by the empires that controlled the ancient world - the Assyrians to the north and Babylon to the east. Now, two generations of captivity had elapsed. And as always happens, kingdoms rise and fall; world empires come and go.

Persia, who conquered Babylon, was more benevolent than their predecessors. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens back to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. Here is the first sign in Chapter 19 of God's great Upper Story—redeeming His promise to provide a way for His people to return home.

Under Zerubbabel, the new governor, nearly 50,000 Jews returned home to Jerusalem. Their city was devastated but still beloved. While there was a lot of work to do, the temple was the first priority, and the altar within the temple was at the very top of the list. This was because it was only when they rebuilt the altar and the surrounding temple that sacrifices could be offered in accordance with the Law of Moses. For over fifty years, God's people had not been able to worship as God had instructed. There was a bit of disappointment because this temple wouldn't compare to the magnificence of the one Solomon built, but the process had begun, and with the foundation and altar laid, true worship of God was again a reality.

But then came a problem: the builders encountered political resistance from the locals. This drained their enthusiasm and they lost their focus. The outcome: for almost 16 years, the project stalled. But the problem was, this wasn't just *any* building. It was the center of their worship. It had been the dwelling place of the visible presence of God. It was the only allowable location for their sacrifices and sacred feasts.

This leads us to the first of three problems the Jews encountered, and that's this:

1. **You *can* go home again, but remember to keep first things first.**

After these sixteen years of delay, the prophet Haggai spoke on God's behalf. Let's read from pages 266 and 267 of *The Story*...

Twice Haggai said, "Give careful thought to your ways." Why? Because the stalled temple work was a problem of misplaced priorities. It wasn't due to a shortage of engineers or bricks—when you boiled it all down, the delay in rebuilding the temple was outward evidence of an inward problem.

The issue was that their own pleasure and comfort had taken precedence over pleasing God. Haggai rebuked them for living in the paneled houses while God's house remained in ruins. Preparing adequate shelter for their families was certainly an understandable need, but they had gone far beyond "need"—so God began to withhold His blessings. They were experiencing drought, poor harvest, and slow reproduction because of their misplaced priorities.

The key is this: a priority is done first. It is the most urgent or most critical for success. It is the driving force of our thinking and our actions. It is not the same as a response to immediate demands around us. We confuse the "tyranny of the urgent" with what is most important.

How often does the tyranny of the urgent ever overtake your priorities? How many of us have had great intentions to spend more time in prayer, or carve just 5 minutes out of our day for a quiet time of reflection, only to be assaulted with fires that have to be put out before we even get to the office? In the same way, the Jews' problem was a common one. There were so many other pressing needs that the people were distracted. Their fields were overgrown from years of disuse; their roads, buildings, and houses needed repairs. Their original priority of worshiping God in a rebuilt temple quickly took a backseat to the struggles of daily life. This leads us to a key principle that's next on your outline:

Good things can become the worst enemy of the *best things*.

I am so proud of you guys. I've always seen this gathering as a tool to move men beyond "good enough." Some begin strong by building the foundation and their altars, but then become comfortable—content in their faith—cozy in their Christianity.

We must not grow as complacent as this first wave of Jews, commissioned to put first things first and rebuild the vehicle of worship before anything else.

We must not be like those who couldn't get warm, who couldn't be filled, whose resources dried up, because they lost sight of what came first.

Listen to the prophet Malachi, who came after Haggai:

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

'In tithes and offerings.' You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3:8-12

This isn't a sermon on giving, but it just stands to reason: if we're going to put first things first, we have to put our money where our mouth is. I got a call from an Oak Hills family where the

mom and dad both lost their jobs and wanted to know if a 10% tithe was still a requirement. I really applaud them, even in the midst of double unemployment, to still somehow honor God financially despite their hardship. I know people who have faithfully tithed from their unemployment checks of \$300 a week. Will a man rob God? The same God who feeds the sparrows? I don't think so—let's resolve today to always put first things first.

The second problem:

2. You can go home again, but there will always be *opposition*.

The Samaritans of the area were none too thrilled about re-establishing the Jewish state in Palestine. None of the locals went to any trouble rolling out the welcome wagon. For one thing, Judea was a completely different place than it was two generations ago. The balance of political power had shifted and could shift back dramatically with a rebuilt and re-energized Jerusalem. So they tried a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to *sabotage* the temple project. While Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, the threats and bribes were enough to stop work on the temple.

But notice God's message during this time of frustration and discouragement. Turn to page 267 in *The Story*...

Eight times, on pages 267-268, the word from God through his prophets was:

"Be strong."

"Do not fear."

"Let your hands be strong."

"Do not be afraid."

It WILL take intentionality and perseverance, but God promised that if you get your priorities in order, finish My temple, and stand fast against the naysayers, "the seed will grow, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew." What will it take for Me to bless you? Put first things first, and when it comes to your antagonists, just trust Me. What was it that Malachi said?

Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

Malachi 3:10-11

But it wasn't over by a long shot. After Haggai called them back to task and got the project going again, sure enough, more opposition sprang up. After the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius, asking just who exactly authorized these guys to come home in the first place? Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had in fact given the royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

God's sense of humor is on grand display here, because what happened next was King Darius sent a letter back to Tattenai, the troublemaker, and told him to fully fund the temple reconstruction out of his own coffers. The plot had backfired and in 516 B.C. the temple was completed. And as we'll see next week in the story of Esther, this won't be the last time we'll see that with God, what goes around comes around, and indeed, divine paybacks are hell.

But there's one more issue with homecomings:

3. You can go home again, but you'll have to adjust your *expectations*.

Last October, I saw York College differently than I did 30 years ago. But my *other* homecoming last year was in July, to Wisconsin. I took my mom to Milwaukee to celebrate the 50th

anniversary of the dedication of the Southside Church of Christ. The building looked exactly like I remembered it, inside and out. The people I remembered from my childhood were older and grayer, but the podium from which my dad led the singing was still there. The same wooden communion trays were still there.

When we drove by our old house, it seemed so much smaller than when I lived there. The vacant lot behind the house where we played was gone. My perception 40 years ago was very different.

The returning Jews also had to shift their expectations. Look at the bottom of page 267...

They must have experienced a wide range of bittersweet emotions as they arrived home to find overgrown fields, neglected roads, demolished homes, and a destroyed temple. The precious hope of a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey was a distant memory. Everywhere they looked they could see evidence of the Divine judgment brought on by their disobedient forefathers. For a few survivors, the Babylonian siege, the famine, disease, and death must have flashed before their eyes daily.

Yes, they had to readjust their expectations. But look now at the first full paragraph on page 268...

What could this mean? So many people become discouraged because as they remodel their lives, it's different the second time around. We look back wistfully on what used to be, in the past, like my college experience, and we can almost taste that bitter sweetness: there's both a nostalgic familiarity, along side a stark realization that things will never be the same. The Jews had to come to grips with this: some wept because this rebuilt temple couldn't hold a candle to Solomon's, but God said don't worry about nostalgia—this temple will be greater than the former. How? Because 500 years later, Jesus Himself would visit this temple. That's what God meant when He said, "I will fill this house with glory." It was a prophecy of the coming Messiah whose presence will sanctify this temple far more than all of Solomon's silver and gold.

What's our takeaway? Some of you had a first love—a journey to Christ early in your life, a temple built in you at a young age. But, as you grew older, that temple fell into decay because of your choices, like Israel. And now many of you have come back—Jesus rebuilt both the temple that lies within you and your faith, as you returned to God. I'm here to tell you today that those voices of guilt and shame from the past can be silenced. Why? Because the second temple in you is greater than the first. How? Because today, with all you've been through, in all the ways you've been tested, even with all your failures, I believe Jesus is more present in you today than at the beginning.

Listen to Peter:

And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him... So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him, you trust him...

1 Peter 1:5-8

Yes, you can go home again.

Just one more observation before we close. The question of balance remains. How do we keep from getting caught up in the Lower Story—putting bread on the table, making a marriage work, worrying about our kids? How do we put first things first?

It would be nice if the Bible gave us a list or an order of priorities so that we could follow a cookbook plan—a neat, tidy recipe for discipleship. But it does not. It gives us principles that we have to apply individually. It is easy to become too legalistic, like my friend from college—follow this strict set of rules and you'll be ok. But of course it's not that easy. How do we prioritize our lives? As the seasons in our lives change, the outworking of our priorities may look different, but the core principles must remain aligned to the will of God.

Some people have suggested that our checkbooks and our calendars reveal our true priorities; yes, but this isn't always the case. For example, the man who works two jobs or long hours could either be providing for the needs of his family so that his wife can be a stay-home mom or he could be avoiding his wife and children, driven by greed for material wealth. Nevertheless, the principle is still a good one: a man's checkbook and his calendar usually provide a clear window into who reigns supreme in his life.

Yes, circumstances and life changes affect our priorities. The addition of a newborn baby or sending a child to college changes the way our checkbooks and calendars look. The chronic illness or death of a loved one changes them just as much. Life happens and things are constantly fluid. Don't worry—every believer struggles to balance the Upper Story priorities with the Lower Story of our daily lives.

It's true: good things can become the worst enemy of the best things. The Israelites' personal wants superseded the best thing—doing the will of God.

Every day, we juggle our daily Lower Story responsibilities with the Upper Story priorities of serving and honoring God, don't we? So what's the right thing? What do we do? Most of all, we pray. Since the seasons change, and our financial and time disbursements with it, true discipleship and putting first things first will by necessity shift as well. The big question is this:

Will you look beyond the daily rat race, the lost job, the lost promotion, the disagreement with your wife... **Will you choose to keep your head above the clouds and pray to see the Upper Story** of what God is doing in your life?

It won't be easy—everyone gets lost in the Lower Story, the details, the daily distractions, just like those who rebuilt the temple. But when we put first things first, the priority isn't building bigger barns, it's making sure we lead our families spiritually by praying for them and with them, helping them see how much God loves them, and building temples in their hearts dedicated to Christ.

There will be opposition from our common enemy. And in the Bible, long and painful seasons of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. God's discipline in our lives is a constant and poignant reminder that this world is not our home. God's great Upper Story is that just as you and I have already been delivered from the bondage to sin by Jesus, one day, one day, you and I will go home, to our real home, delivered from even the presence of sin and death, to the land of eternal promise, where all things will be made new, and home will be forever.

Chapter 20: The Antithesis and Antidote

The story of Esther has at least three key points:

1. **First, it confirms the** _____.

God is still working *even when* _____.

2. **God provides another glimpse of the** _____ **through Esther.**

- a) _____
I ask only one thing from the Lord. This is what I want: Let me live in the Lord's house all my life. Let me see the Lord's beauty and look with my own eyes at his Temple.

Psalm 27:4

- b) Both lived in _____.
Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me.

John 14:10

- c) For such a _____/In the fullness of _____
"Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Esther 4:14

But when the right time came, God sent his Son who was born of a woman and lived under the law.

Galatians 4:4

- d) Both exposed _____ and were willing to _____ should it come to that.

3. _____ **is an abomination to the LORD. To attack**

_____ **is to attack God.**

And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.

Revelation 12:3-5

If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as it loves its own. But I have chosen you out of the world, so you don't belong to it. That is why the world hates you. John 15:18-19

In the story of Esther, we see the antidote to hate: _____.

"All that is necessary for evil to succeed is that good men do nothing."—Edmund Burke

"There are a thousand men hacking at the branches of evil for every one who is striking at its root."

—Thoreau

And what is at the root of hatred? _____.

Today's Equipping Point

All _____ stops with me.

You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the high council. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Matthew 5:21-22

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

Romans 8:35, 37

Discussion Questions

1. How often have you used prayer and fasting when faced with a crisis?
2. Has God ever placed you in a position to serve a greater purpose than you imagined?
3. What courage will you display today to defeat hatred in any form?

Teaching Script

In the mid-1930's, there was a man named Casper who lived quietly with his family. He was a Dutch watchmaker who ran a family business, and was known for an open and loving heart. He and his family were Christians, ministering to the downtrodden in the name of Christ, without regard to need or nationality.

Toward the end of the 30's, the family's resolve to bless others endured what would become its greatest test. Their Holland home had always served as a home for anyone in need. But during World War II, their house became much more than a place of hospitality—it became a hiding place for Jews and the Dutch underground. Casper ten Boom and his two daughters, Betsie and Corrie, were compelled by their faith to protect the Jews and others sought by the Nazis. At any given time, there were usually six or seven people living illegally in their safe house. On February 28, 1944, the Gestapo raided their home. They seized thirty refugees who came by that day, as well as Casper, his daughters and three other relatives. All were arrested and imprisoned. The six people that were hidden in the false wall in Corrie's bedroom and remained quietly undetected for 47 hours until Dutch underground workers were able to free them.

After only ten days in Scheveningen Prison, 84-year-old Casper died. When he was asked if he knew he could die for helping Jews, he responded, *"It would be an honor to give my life for God's ancient people."* Corrie and Betsie spent ten months in three different prisons sharing the love of Christ with other prisoners before Betsie died, as did her brother and nephew. Four Ten Booms gave their lives for protecting Jews against the venomous Nazis. Corrie alone survived. The Ten Booms' vibrant faith gave them an understanding of God's Upper Story including a deep love for God's chosen people.

In Chapter 20 of *The Story*, the Jews faced similar circumstances 2,500 years before Hitler. As our story of Esther unfolds today, we see anti-Semitism in its worst form. But we also see, once again, God's amazing provision for His people.

The Persian King in power, Xerxes, had good reason to party. His vast empire was powerful and prosperous. His queen was lovely. His palace was ideal for a celebration befitting such a monarch. In what probably resembled the toga party in *Animal House*, for six months he celebrated with his court. Finally the king summoned Queen Vashti, to put her on display for all the drunken guests. It's safe to say she had been treated like "arm candy" for years—but this time, she refused. Big mistake. Kings do not like to be refused. And so, with his advisors' support, he stripped Vashti of her crown and banished her from his presence.

Kings don't like to be embarrassed, but they also do not like to be queenless. So Xerxes commissioned a kingdom-wide beauty pageant and young women from every province were whisked into the king's harem for a year long visit at the royal spa. One such woman was a Jewish girl named Esther who had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Esther won everyone's heart, including the king's. He eventually made her queen but did *not* know she was a Jew. Soon after, Mordecai overheard a plot kill the king. He passed the news to his cousin Esther, and the king was rescued and the conspirators hanged. Fortunately, the royal scribe recorded Mordecai's service in the annals of the king—God knew this event would be critical later.

The other central figure in the story is Haman, King Xerxes' right hand man. Haman's head swelled in his high standing, and pretty soon he was loving the way all the royal officials knelt at his feet—everyone that is, except Mordecai. Because Mordecai refused to kowtow, Haman was enraged. His pride was so offended, that to exact his revenge, Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to exterminate Mordecai and all his people, the entire Jewish population of Persia. He cast a lot, or pur, and chose a single day of unfettered violence against the Jews.

Mordecai sent word to Esther asking her to beg the king for mercy. Queen Esther feared for her life because no one could legally go before the king without prior permission. But Mordecai's immortal words persuaded her: *"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"* Her courageous response was, "If I perish, I perish."

They prepared themselves for this dangerous mission the way God's people should: through prayer and fasting. As Esther approached the king, Xerxes welcomed her and offered to grant her heart's desire. She invited the king and Haman to two private banquets. Haman was elated to be the exclusive royal guest but still enraged over Mordecai's insolence. With all the satisfaction of a Cheshire cat, he erected a pole on which Mordecai could be impaled.

Kings with full stomachs must not sleep well, so Xerxes spent the midnight hours listening to the royal decrees. He discovered the account of Mordecai's report that saved his own life and realized this act of loyalty hadn't been rewarded. How might he honor such a man? He put this question to Haman for advice. Arrogantly assuming that *he* was the king's favored, Haman dreamed up an elaborate ceremony. But within moments, through clenched teeth, Haman was giving his nemesis the king's robes, leading him through the streets and singing the praises of Mordecai. God does indeed have quite a sense of humor.

Haman later enjoyed the queen's second banquet until Esther exposed his plot to destroy her people. The king left the room in a fury only to return and discover Haman appearing to assault his queen. He ordered that Haman be impaled on the very pole intended for Mordecai.

The king could not repeal his original edict declaring the destruction of the Jews. But he enabled Mordecai to issue a counter-edict providing for the Jews to take up their own defense. The day planned for destruction became a day of deliverance. Though the lot was cast, God remained the Author of the story. Even in exile, He protected His people, and in Esther, we see God's heart for saving us all.

The story of Esther has three key points.

1. First, it confirms the great Upper Story of God.

Over and over, we have seen God's faithfulness. In spite of idolatry, barrenness, sin, and bad choices, God had sovereignly led His people; and now, He illustrates again that nothing will stop his plan of redemption through Israel.

We've seen this truth time and again through the Old Testament: **God is still working even when we cannot see his plan.**

- God was working His plan even while Joseph was in prison
- God was working His plan even while Moses escaped slaughter as a baby
- God was working His plan even while calling Gideon in hiding
- God was working His plan even while Samson was blinded and made into a spectator sport
- God was working His plan even while Saul was gunning for David
- God was working His plan even while the kingdom was split in two
- God was working His plan even during captivity in Babylon
- God was working His plan as Persia took over and allowed the Jews to return home

If you take away nothing else this morning, put this on your dashboard: *God is still working even when we cannot see His plan.*

- God is working His plan during a time of foreclosure, unemployment and financial meltdown
- God is working His plan despite the ever-present threat of terrorism
- God is working His plan even through the frustrations and hardships in your family

Our first takeaway from Esther is that in the darkest hour, on the brink of ethnic cleansing and facing a potential death sentence for approaching the king, God's plan of redemption continued. And you and I today can have confidence that through divorce, identity theft, and cancer, God is working His glorious Upper Story. That's what faith is: the substance of things we hope for, the evidence of things we do not yet see.

The *second takeaway* is related:

2. God provides another glimpse of the Messiah through Esther.

Once again, a shadow of the Messiah appears, this time through a woman. God's chosen people experienced a miraculous day of deliverance. Just as Moses led them from Egypt after the death of the firstborn to establish Passover, so Esther's courage leads to the establishment of the Feast of Purim.

Freedom from bondage always requires a celebration. People often remember the month and day they received Christ and were saved, or the date of their baptism. Alcoholics often carry a coin with them that marks the date of their sobriety. We celebrate anniversaries of the day we stopped smoking or the day our children came home. And like Passover, the Feast of Purim celebrates *delivery*.

The Jews even now celebrate the survival of their people with great merriment. Next month, on March 9-10, the Feast of Purim will be held again. The Book of Esther will be read in the synagogue. People will send gifts of food to their neighbors and part of the celebration will be to also provide food for the poor. People will dress in costumes representing Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus, the king, and hold carnivals.

Esther's delivery of her people is another royal precursor to Jesus Himself:

- **Beauty**

I ask only one thing from the Lord. This is what I want: Let me live in the Lord's house all my life. Let me see the Lord's beauty and look with my own eyes at his Temple.
Psalm 27:4

- **Both lived in submission to authority.** While Esther was subject to King Xerxes and his invitation, Jesus was submitted as well:

Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me.

John 14:10

- **For such a time as this/in the fullness of time**

"Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Esther 4:14

But when the right time came, God sent his Son who was born of a woman and lived under the law.

Galatians 4:4

- **Both exposed evil and were willing to die should it come to that.**

Gender doesn't matter—Esther is yet another in a long line of forerunners of Jesus Himself.

And the third takeaway:

3. **Anti-Semitism is an abomination to the LORD. To attack His people is to attack God.**

The book of Esther teaches us the dangers of anti-Semitism, the Divine protection of Israel, and the consequences to those who attack the chosen people of God. There is something more profound than "normal racism" against a people group when it comes to the Jews. I submit to you that it is nothing short of Satanic.

Here's why: from the Garden, man has been in need of a Savior. The separation caused by the sin of Adam would require a perfect, sinless man to restore the relationship between God and mankind. No sinful man could possibly bridge that gap. Therefore God promised that one day a seed from the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Satan has been attempting to defeat God and His redemptive purpose ever since by eliminating the line of the coming Redeemer.

Consider Revelations 12:

And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.

Revelation 12:3-5

A few verses later, the dragon is clearly identified as Satan (Revelation 12:9). The child can be none other than Jesus who was caught up to the throne of God and is the King of Kings who is to rule all nations. This is a battle that has been fought through the ages.

Had Pharaoh's or Herod's infanticide succeeded, the line of the Messiah would have been cut off completely. Had Haman been successful, the line of the Messiah would have been completely exterminated.

But the plan of God was formed before the foundation of the world, to pursue and rescue humanity from Haman, from Hitler, from Satan himself.

Jesus said,

"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as it loves its own. But I have chosen you out of the world, so you don't belong to it. That is why the world hates you."

John 15:18-19

Forces of darkness have always been aligned against not just *Jesus*, but his *followers*. New Testament believers experienced persecution in nearly every city—the letters to Philippi, Thessalonica, the Hebrews, and from James all spoke of tribulation and sharing Jesus' sufferings because we are different.

From the Crusades to the Holocaust, the persecution of God's people has always been with us. Why? Because people who hate cannot understand a community built on love.

And in the story of Esther, we see the antidote to hate: the courage of love.

It takes great courage to love selflessly and completely, because unconditional love carries with it great risk: the risk of rejection. Anybody can hate—but only those with real backbone and fortitude have the mettle and courage to love regardless.

I don't know—perhaps Casper Ten Boom and his family were inspired by the 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke:

All that is necessary for evil to succeed is that good men do nothing.—Edmund Burke

Gentlemen, we will be required to take a stand. Passivity is NOT an option.

To love courageously is the antidote to every kind of hate, racism, and anti-Semitism. But let us ensure we strike accurately.

Thoreau said: *There are a thousand men hacking at the branches of evil for every one who is striking at its root.*

So let's zero in. **What is at the root of hatred?** Of Anti-Semitism? Of bigotry? The same thing that was at the root of Haman's anger: **pride**. He loved the honor bestowed by the king, and when Mordecai refused to be a yes man—refused to brown-nose the second in command, look what happened: an attempt at mass genocide.

The damage that pride has done over the ages is staggering. With Eve, it took the form of not believing what God said, but suspecting she hadn't been told everything. With Haman, it was people don't treat me the way I think I should be treated. With Hitler and

with white supremacists, it was a conviction that others not like them are somehow defective.

With you and me, what does pride look like? Perhaps belittling someone because they don't share my political view or because they cut me off on the highway. Perhaps pride for me is an inability to say "I'm sorry," or an unwillingness, and inflexibility to change my mind about something.

So this morning, let us stop for a moment before sharpening our machetes and consider the wisdom of Thoreau: before you start chopping at leaves and branches, take one good swing at the **root** of evil: your pride.

And so there's our Equipping Point for today. How do you lead well?

All hatred stops with me.

And that doesn't just mean racial or ethnic bigotry. Hatred is what Jesus said it is:

You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the high council. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Matthew 5:21-22

This is hatred because when we get to the point where our anger will not subside, or we can casually call someone an idiot, or curse someone, our pride has taken over. And here's why it's that dangerous—we talked about this when we read through the Gospels a couple of years ago, but it bears repeating. When we adopt this viewpoint toward someone—an ability to discard someone, to denigrate them with names, to deny they too are made in the image of God, we have adopted the enemy's view of him. We see him as Satan does: worthless and dispensable.

God sees all of mankind—ALL of mankind—as worthy of Christ's death. But when our pride takes over, we see them as inconsequential and insignificant. Could there be an emotion further from the heart of God? Jesus warns us about hating, about lasting anger, about retaining bitterness. Be careful, He said; when you disdain, you label as unimportant—and nothing could be further from Jesus' view of that same person.

And so today, I challenge us—all of us—to stand against hatred of all kinds. In the vernacular of Edmund Burke, "I say thee nay." We must resolve, here and now, that our view of others: the last and the least; Republicans and Democrats; our view of anyone unlike us can have nothing to do with our prejudices, and everything to do with Jesus' estimation that all of humanity was worth dying for. May it never be said of the men of

the Next Level that we see anyone: an ex-wife, a distracted driver, a wayward child, a victim of AIDS, or any person, male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, as dispensable. For under the cross we are ALL one in Christ Jesus. Amen??

May we love others like Jesus, who prayed for His tormentors. May we have the courage to unswervingly follow a Savior who, just hours before His death, bizarrely said, "Take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The book of Esther teaches us first that God can be trusted for deliverance even though His ways are unknown to us; but it teaches us further that if we do not wait on Him, if we demand illumination rather than faith, demand our timetable over God's sovereignty, it's likely that it is our pride that requires these things.

If it is nothing else, the story of Haman is a testimony to what we are capable of if our pride goes unchecked. May we, in the words of Peter, humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may lift us up in due time. This was the final triumph of both Esther and the Messiah she prefigured: a humility that, in the fullness of time, brought the perfect antidote to hatred and prejudice. This antidote is a love that was willing to die so that redemption could come to the world, even to the likes of you and me.

Chapter 21: God's Remodeling Project

Six leadership principles from Nehemiah

L _____

The lesson: A good leader leaves his _____, takes _____, and follows the _____ of God for a mission bigger than himself.

E _____

Lesson: A good leader gets a _____ of the situation before acting.

A _____

He motivated the leaders by _____ himself with them.

He didn't get bogged down in "_____ by _____."

Lesson: Good leaders _____.

D _____

Satan's tactics with Nehemiah (and us):

- _____ and _____
- _____ of _____
- _____

Lesson: Good leaders develop _____.

E _____

"Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

Lesson: Good leaders _____ their team.

R _____

Nehemiah respected:

- _____
- _____
- His _____

Lesson: Good leaders respect _____, _____ and _____.

Malachi's final encouragement: Three things that need repairing *on the inside*:

- a) _____
- b) _____

In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard.

1 Peter 3:7

- c) _____

What do all of these have in common? Not _____.

Discussion Questions

1. Which part of being a L.E.A.D.E.R. challenges you most?
2. How do you determine if a message from God or another source?
3. Of the three things Malachi mentioned, which one do you need to focus on repairing this week?

Teaching Script

It's no surprise that the Hebrew people were homesick after 70 years of foreign captivity. In Chapter 19, Zerubbabel led 50,000 former slaves back to the holy city in 537 B.C. Many, however, stayed in Babylon and didn't return.

Later on, Ezra had earned the favor of Persia's King during his time in Babylon. Ezra was authorized to take a second contingent of Israelites back home. He was a faithful scribe and teacher, and he was given permission not only to teach God's law but also a mandate to appoint judges and a bottomless expense account to finance his journey. So Ezra led the second group back from captivity in 457 B.C.

And now, in Chapter 21, it was Nehemiah's turn. Thirteen years after Ezra, he led the third wave back to Jerusalem. In God's Upper Story, this was the fulfillment of what He had promised to David: the survival of the remnant community, preserved during the exile, returned to the Land of Promise. The nation who had been punished for her consistent disobedience was back to rebuild the temple and restore their relationship with God. But they were easily discouraged and their work stalled. Ezra and Nehemiah were reformers who were determined not to allow this nation to fall back into her old ways. Their stories were written to encourage a fearful, discouraged, needy group of Israelites who were no longer sure of their own identity. As we'll see, Nehemiah concentrated on first rebuilding the city walls; then Ezra would focus on rebuilding the broken people.

We've had several lessons on leadership since beginning our study of *The Story*; but NO study of leadership in the Bible would be complete without including Nehemiah.

My favorite funny story about leadership is as sad as it is humorous. One day, during the French Revolution, a man was seen running down the street, chasing after a group of soldiers. Somebody yelled at him, "Why are you chasing them?" He shouted back, "I am their captain. I must discover where they are going so that I may lead them!"

It's safe to say Nehemiah was a leader out in front. As an effective leader, he should surely be grouped with Moses, Joshua, and David. But because his story is deep within the Old Testament historical books that are lesser known, the practical life lessons that he provides can go largely neglected. So let's examine six leadership principles from Nehemiah that are just as relevant today as they were 2,400 years ago.

Leave

Most leaders are called to leave where they are and move **toward** the mission God has for them. It's impossible to lead from a position of inertia.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, perhaps his most trusted servant. He had every excuse to stay right where he was—important job, good pay, lots of perks. But God had put a fire in his belly, a passion in his heart, and he could not accomplish the mission of rebuilding the walls from a distance. Instead, with permission from the king, he chose to leave Susa and go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and restore the people's identity as God's chosen.

The lesson: A good leader leaves his comfort zone, takes risks, and follows the call of God for a mission bigger than himself.

Last year when we studied Nehemiah in our character studies of men in the Bible, we called Nehemiah's obsession a BHAG—a Big, Holy, Audacious Goal. As a leader, do you have a BHAG that so captures you, that you'd be willing to leave your comfort zone, take a risk, and follow the call of God?

Evaluation

Although he was convinced that God Himself called Nehemiah to rebuild the walls, he evaluated each situation carefully.

First, he knew he needed the king's approval and documentation to verify his travel and mission (Nehemiah 2:5-8). He did not rush to secure these things. He patiently waited four months until he knew the timing was right.

Then, just three days after arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah secretly surveyed the damage to the walls under the cover of night. It was crucial that he have an accurate, firsthand assessment of the mission that lay ahead. And by concealing himself at night, he accomplished two things:

1. First, Israel's enemies couldn't stir up resistance to a plan they didn't know about.
2. Second, he had time to formulate a plan before the naysayers among his own people started with why they shouldn't or couldn't rebuild the walls.

Remember, the walls had been neglected at this point for 93 years, since the first wave returned to Jerusalem. Praying and trusting God does not mean that proper research and planning are unnecessary.

The Lesson: A good leader gets a realistic assessment of the situation before acting.

Action

Nehemiah had to turn his vision for rebuilding the walls into a reality. He challenged the local leaders to recognize the need to act. Let's read together from the bottom of page 295...

He motivated the leaders by identifying himself with them. He used "we" and "us." He didn't waste precious time endless committee meetings. And when rumors of an impending attack circulated, Nehemiah took action. He staged armed guards around the workers to who stood ready to defend their families and their city. He carefully evaluated, but **he didn't get bogged down in "paralysis by analysis."**

The Lesson: Good leaders act.

Discernment

Nehemiah faced both external and internal threats to the work of rebuilding.

His wisdom and discernment alerted him to the very real threat of an enemy attack. He discerned that what had initially begun as mocking and ridicule had *escalated* into a unified plot to strike them.

After the walls were finished, Nehemiah discerned the ill intentions of Sanballat and Tobiah. Since their other attempts to halt the work had failed, they turned to more subtle methods to undermine the final phase of the gates. By asking him to meet them "on the

plain of Ono,” which was a day’s travel from Jerusalem, he discerned that they intended to do him personal harm.

Later on, as their tactics changed, Nehemiah’s wisdom alerted him to the false “insider” Jewish prophet Shemaiah who suggested he hide inside the temple to protect himself from death threats.

His enemies retaliated with intimidation and made repeated attempts to out-manuever Nehemiah and his rebuilding project, but Nehemiah was undeterred. He encouraged his leaders and armed his people. Some worked while others stood guard. Some carried supplies with one hand and a weapon in the other. Even when Israel’s enemies enlisted an Israelite as a false prophet to undermine the progress, Nehemiah was not shaken.

Satan’s tactics with Nehemiah (and us):

- ***Mocking and ridicule*** (“a fox couldn’t walk on that wall”)—Accuser, belittler
- ***“Weapons of Mass Deception”*** (“meet us out in Laredo so we can talk”)
- ***Misdirection***—this is what sleight-of-hand magic is all about. Misdirection leads you to look in the wrong place, where the magic isn’t happening. Let me show you....

This is like throwing a rock at a distant bush and get people to shoot at the wrong target. And this is what Satan often does; he focuses us on the wrong thing. We can be deceived into believing our brothers and sisters are the real enemy. It’s brilliant finger-pointing.

Lesson: Good leaders develop *discernment*.

Encourager

Nehemiah was an encourager. Nehemiah used his personal testimony to encourage the local leaders to rebuilding the walls. “I also told them about the gracious hand of God on me and what the king had said to me.” By assuring these city leaders that both their heavenly King and their earthly king were supportive of the vision, they gained great courage, and were able to “work with all their heart.”

And once the project started, Nehemiah encouraged the workers when they were physically exhausted and emotionally weary. When their strength was giving out, he discerned that the threat of attack had worn them too thin. He knew full well that he alone could not accomplish the mission. Instead, he encouraged them with a new plan to continue the process of rebuilding with some building and others standing guard. It’s always easy to be negative under difficult circumstances, but Nehemiah’s faith was rooted in knowing his God. On page 298 of *The Story*, he shouted, “Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

Lesson: Good leaders *encourage* their team.

Respect

Nehemiah respected God, authorities, and his subordinates.

Nehemiah never failed to give **God** full credit in the process of rebuilding the walls. From the very beginning, he prayed and acknowledged that the “hand of God” was upon him, and that it was “what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.” When they feared

an attack, he reminded them of their God. “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your people, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” He also showed great respect for God when he defied the false prophet’s suggestion that he hide in the temple to protect himself. He refused to consider defiling the temple to save his skin!

Second, Nehemiah respected the rightful king’s authority. Although he always knew that the mission was from God, he respected the authority of the king by requesting a leave of absence and garnered the king’s documented support. Romans 13 tells us a godly leader will respect his or her earthly government. He also respected the authority of the local Jerusalem priests and nobles. He presented his plan to rebuild to the local leaders who then enlisted the support of the people, and he called upon Ezra to lead the worship after the walls were rebuilt.

And last but not least, Nehemiah respected the needs of his team. When they were weary, he met their need for protection. Perhaps most importantly, he rolled up his sleeves and worked right along side all the other laborers. He said, “Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.” In fact, the king had endowed him with the authority of a governor but he refused to use the governor’s food allowance because he did not want to burden the people with the taxes.

Lesson: Good leaders respect God, government, and those they lead.

And so, because of Nehemiah’s faith and leadership, the walls were rebuilt in just over seven weeks. What an incredible accomplishment! But there was still one rebuilding job left. Zerubbabel and Haggai had first rebuilt the altar and the temple. Nehemiah, the walls.

And now, last of all, there’s one more piece of reconstruction left. Ezra the priest set out to rebuild God’s people. He began by teaching them the Scriptures for the next 13 years. The people gathered to hear Ezra read, and other priests joined in to teach as well.

Let’s read from page 300 of *The Story*...

At last, they got it! They grasped the reality of God’s great Upper Story. Do you see the correlation? This is what we’ve been about the last six months! This is the whole point of The Story! To read God’s word, swallow it, digest it, and understand it. Time after time, for so many people, the light bulb has gone on as we’ve read through the Old Testament and seen God’s great Upper Story prevail. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate Randy’s wisdom and leadership, that before anything else, we walk through the Word of God—just like Ezra did as he read the book of the Law to all the people. Can you see that here and now, we are reliving the Ezra story: going back to the Word of God and rebuilding our hearts. What an honor to follow in his footsteps!

And now we are at the end of the Old Testament. And there’s one more messenger: Malachi. He continues Ezra’s work by telling Israel there are **three specific things that need repairing—from the inside**. Three things to focus on. Let’s read his words beginning on page 302...

- a) ***Worship.*** You're bringing leftovers, blind and diseased animals for sacrifice. Do I strike you as the kind of God with whom that might be acceptable? Instead of a fragrant aroma of sacrifice, the Lord says, "Do not light useless fires on My altar." In other words, stop wasting My time.
- b) ***Marriage.*** This is no shock at all, since the husband/wife relationship is the analogy that God has used all along with Israel. If you are unfaithful or disrespectful of your wife, you are making a mockery of what I've called for in MY relationship with YOU. If you diss your wife, you diss Me.

In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard. 1 Peter 3:7

Man up and repair your marriage.

- c) ***Giving.*** Talked about this a couple of weeks ago. Bring your whole tithe, not just the table scraps, the loose change under the seat cushion of the couch.

What do all of these have in common? **Not giving your best.** Put another way, are you phoning it in to God? To your wife? Is your faith some halfway, half-hearted attempt to maintain a pretense of spirituality? If so, let us heed God's last words to His people before 400 years of silence: *Give your best.*

At the end, as a sign of things to come, Malachi finally told of the return of the prophet Elijah. God had restored His people and protected His faithful remnant. He had protected Judah's royal line in keeping with his promise to David. He spoke His final words of warning and promise through Malachi...and then God was silent. His people would not hear from Him again for 400 years, until the promised Elijah, John the Baptist, would step forth as God's new messenger. God's redemptive story, for now, was quietly marching toward history's climactic event.

Chapter 22: The Time Has Come

- ➔ God's _____ intersects with our _____ at the birth of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:46-48

- ➔ The first audience became the first _____, who then became the first _____.

I have other sheep that are not in this flock, and I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:16

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ's death.

Ephesians 2:13

Out of Egypt I called my Son.

Numbers 24:8

- ➔ We are never _____ from God.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:18

Today's Equipping Point

Capture your _____

Discussion Questions

1. What detail of the birth of Christ has always particularly captured you?
2. Are you encouraged or nervous that there is no place we are safe from God?
3. How will you be vigilant today for Upper Story moments in your life?

Teaching Script

[Play the first and last minute of the 1812 Overture]

Here we are in Chapter 22 of *The Story*—the prelude, or overture of the New Testament. The Time had come—the Upper Story was here. The prophecy of Immanuel, God with us, was fulfilled at the birth of Christ.

But where was the orchestra? The crashing cymbals? The cannons blasting? This was the apogee of human history! That's something to consider...let's come back to that in a minute.

It was His mother, Mary, who was the first to hear the news. In the midst of wedding plans and setting up house, the angel Gabriel pronounced that she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Talk about re-prioritizing your day! Nothing could have been further from her mind...or her to-do list. Mary was engaged and a virgin.

But the power of the Most High would take care of everything, the angel said, so Mary believed. She accepted her position as God's servant and praised Him with complete trust in His plan.

Joseph was the next to know. Once she started showing, the facts couldn't be ignored. He considered pursuing a legal dissolution of their relationship to save them both from the humiliation of an illegitimate pregnancy, but he received his own angelic visitor, who confirmed Mary's innocence and gave his blessing on their marriage. Joseph married Mary and soon after made the journey to Bethlehem to pay his taxes as required by law. The town was bustling and the inn was full, so the Son of God was born, of all places, in a stable.

Angels delivered the birth announcement and shepherds became the welcoming committee for the child. They hurried to see for themselves, and found a surprisingly unassuming setting for a king: a baby in a feeding trough, accompanied by his mother, earthly father, and the local livestock. God also sent signs in the stars, and faraway wise men charted their course with gifts in hand. After talking to the visitors, King Herod felt threatened by the birth of another monarch, so he ordered the massacre of all the baby boys in the surrounding areas. God sent angels again so His redemptive plan would stay its course. They warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus until it was safe to return.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Israel only after Herod's death, and they made their home in Nazareth. Jesus grew up there as the son of faithful Jews. He and His family traveled to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover. When Jesus was 12, He got carried away discussing theology and missed the convoy back home. His parents returned and found Him sitting with all the seminary professors, who were amazed at His words. Jesus grew up as all boys do, and Scripture tells us that He increased in wisdom and favor with God and with people.

Every Christmas, every time I read the account of the entrance of Jesus into the world, I am struck not just that He would come to save us, but even more at how He came.

Heaven had been very quiet for 400 years. No burning bushes. No pillars of fire or clouds of smoke. No splitting seas. No visions. No dreams. No prophets. No message from God...just silence.

Then, in a simple, unpretentious, quiet way, a word—but not just a word, The Word. At the time, the event mattered only to a blue collar carpenter and his teenage bride. There was no Doppler system on the planet sensitive enough to pick up this event. The Richter Scale didn't even budge. Not only did key event of human history have no buildup, no crescendo, no cymbals and cannons, there was no media, no paparazzi, no breaking news...not even a wedding shower. Mary and Joseph weren't registered at Babies R Us, there was no framed birth certificate, no small bassinet with a mobile over it playing Brahms' Lullaby. In fact, if it weren't for some local shepherds and a couple of distant astrologers, no one else would have known.

But in fact, history had changed. The Word of God had taken on flesh and blood and was first heard in a baby's cry. His birth was unspectacular, yet His presence dispelled darkness and cast an inescapable ray of light across history, past, present and future. God's promises to Abraham and David had found fulfillment at long last. Jesus would bless all nations and would take His rightful place on David's throne. It is this event to which everything thus far in The Story has pointed.

The main point for us to see this morning is this:

➔ **God's Upper Story intersects with our Lower Story at the birth of Jesus Christ, the God-man.**

For six months now, over and over we've seen glimpses of God's great over-arching Upper Story of redemption. And here it is! Up close and personal! This is where *everything* converges. If there were a first century Super-conducting Super-collider between God and man, **Jesus** is what that impact would produce. So let's spend a few minutes observing this collision of the human and the Divine. Let's walk back through the details of this story and examine the intersections of Lower and Upper Stories.

In the Lower Story, we see an engaged couple, Mary and Joseph. But the Upper Story intersects their lives, as the Holy Spirit impregnates Mary and the angel visits. Now, Mary no longer sees herself in the Lower Story but as part of God's great plan. And in what is typically known as the *Magnificat*, her song of praise, we see that she **gets** it:

Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation will call me blessed. For he, the Mighty One, is holy, and he has done great things for me.

Luke 1:46-48

That's an Upper Story viewpoint if I ever heard one.

Back in the Lower Story, her fiancé Joseph, a good man, is caught off guard, awkward and embarrassed. He doesn't want to disgrace Mary, so he'll end it quietly. But then he himself is caught up into the Upper Story when he is visited by an angel, and he discovers there is so much more going on here than he thought.

Meanwhile, the details of life in the Lower Story go on. The census is being taken, and they have to travel with Mary in a delicate state. They have to go slowly, so when they arrive there is only a barn, and it is time for her to give birth. There were likely many pregnant women who were also making their way to their hometowns, but this birth happened to occur in that stable. And in the meantime, shepherds were close by tending their sheep.

Yet again, the Upper Story invades the Lower, and the angel now visits the shepherds, informing them of the gravity of this seemingly normal night above all others. How significant and appropriate that the first to know of His coming, outside of Mary and Joseph, were men who foreshadowed the Great Shepherd in their care, feeding and protection of their flock. And how ironic is it that these shepherds would soon become His flock, and He would lay down His life for them. Every detail of this story carries great significance, as we'll see.

- ➔ And so, the **first audience became the first *church***, as the shepherds came and worshipped the child. **Then they became the first *missionaries***, when they went to tell everyone in the surrounding towns what they had witnessed.

The Lower Story becomes the Upper Story once again.

It did as well for the wise men, astrologers who were caught up into the Upper Story by the presence of another celestial marker, this time a mysterious star. The Upper Story significance of these wise men is that even at his birth, Jesus would reach out and extend the Kingdom to *Gentiles*, who would join the small congregation by bringing gifts that symbolized who He was: They brought Him gold, which was due a king; they brought frankincense, which was due the God of Heaven, an offering of fragrant aroma; and they brought him myrrh, which was used to embalm dead bodies. Even here, the Upper Story of the Cross casts its shadow across His birth. And by these gifts, the Gentiles had now been caught up into the Upper Story, giving him His due as King, as God, and as the Lamb who would take away the sins of the world. Amazing...

Later Jesus would confirm this wide-open door to the Kingdom:

I have other sheep that are not in this flock, and I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:16

Paul, who was the apostle to the Gentiles, echoed Jesus when he said:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ's death.

Ephesians 2:13

And then of course later, in another Upper Story event, the angel returned to tell them to take safe haven in Egypt from Herod, fulfilling the prophecy from the book of Numbers:

Out of Egypt I called my Son.

Numbers 24:8

Why do we spend the time this morning observing the constant interplay between the Lower and Upper Stories? How does this matter today? Very simply, because of this:

If the birth of the central figure of history, the Messiah, the one to whom everything points...if this birth could take place among laborers not royalty, in a stable rather than a king's court, then it would seem God is sending a very specific message. All through the OT we've seen shadows, forerunners of the Christ, as God telegraphed the focal point of history over and over. From Abel, to Joseph, to Moses, to Joshua, to Hosea, to Esther, so many OT characters quietly whispered Jesus' name centuries before His arrival. So how is it that such a long-awaited, anticipated event would have such a modest, reserved debut, without glitz or pomp and circumstance? Why does it matter today?

In one of his devotional books, Frederick Buechner makes this point: The quiet, unpretentious entrance of the Savior to the world loudly proclaims this message:

➔ **We are never safe from God.**

Because of the nature of this birth, people who believe in God can never be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him born in a stable, they can never again be sure where He will appear. We can never again be sure to what lengths He will go, or to what depths He will descend in His wild pursuit of man—this is Upper Story of the Bible...the relentless pursuit of man throughout time by an obsessed God.

If the holiness, power and majesty of God were present in this humble, unassuming event—the birth of a peasant's child—then there is no place or time so lowly but that holiness can be present *there* too. There is no place today, in your life and mine, that is so desperate, so atrocious, but that Jesus is not present with us. That's the message.

So this means that we are never safe, that there is no place we can hide from God, no venue where we are sheltered from His power to break us in order to heal us, to recreate us in His image. And while we may feel very exposed, knowing God's tendency to surface at any time, it should give us great comfort, that even in our darkest and dingiest moments, when we're filled with shame, guilt-ridden over sin, or in hopeless despair, the Savior of the world has such humility that He is ready to join us even there, where we least expect him. Maybe that's why the Psalmist says,

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.
Psalm 34.18

The message of the birth of Jesus is not just that God has infiltrated our world and lived inside our skin, but that his meekness enables Him to always meet us where we are, even if that place is corrupt, compromising, or embarrassing.

Even at the very beginning of His life, Jesus drew ALL men, local and distant, learned and unlearned, Jew and Gentile, to Himself. The Upper Story of God's redemption of mankind is even here, at the birth of Jesus, a unifying event designed to bring the world together. There is no one and no place out of the reach of God's grace.

Throughout the world today, people are born, they grow up, they go to work, they manage their lives, they get old, and they die—but the larger and more important picture is that each of our lives has meaning, far more than just the working and growing and

dying. Life adds up somehow, and if there is meaning in the birth of a peasant's child, then there is meaning in the daily events of our lives. The Upper Story of God that gave eternal meaning and purpose to Mary and Joseph's lives intersects your life on a moment-by-moment basis. Holy, Upper Story intersections aren't limited to Sunday worship services or blinding lights on the road to Damascus. Several times today, you and I will experience Upper Story moments that carry an eternal weight. Will we recognize them? What will we do with them?

There's our Equipping Point for today:

Capture your Upper Story moments.

Be on the lookout for Jesus to break through the mundane and provide an opportunity to serve someone without a reason. Pray for eyes to see a chance to engage your child in a conversation that can become a small teaching point about how big their God is. Break free of your own patterns, your own ruts, and see if God is not somehow speaking redemption into your life, through the reconciliation of an old relationship, the opportunity to show grace and not vengeance, or perhaps just five minutes to say "thank you."

What a God we serve, who, just like Joseph and Mary, interrupts the daily grind of our lives with moments of great meaning, Upper Story moments that allow us to see a bigger picture, a long-term perspective, and a master plan in which everything truly does work together for good. God's pursuit of us never ends, and his promise to build a new heaven and a new earth began 2,000 years ago, with this child, an ever-present Savior...a faithful Carpenter preparing a home for those of us lost in the wonder of a birth—a birth that has **transformed** each of us into sons of God.

[Prayer]

Lord we marvel once again that you would come and dwell with us, to know us and to save us. We gaze in wonder at the humility of the One who created us—the beacon of redemption. Give us ears to hear this familiar story afresh, that all day, we become aware of these Upper Story moments of opportunity. Remind us when we fail today that Jesus will meet us even there, to heal, to lead us away from darkness, into his marvelous light.

Chapters 23-24: Creative Destruction

The dual missions of Jesus:

1. _____ the notion of the long-awaited Messiah.
2. To _____ His dominion and authority over all other forces.

Recalibration, Part One (Chapter 23)

Today's Equipping Point

Never fail to _____ people to Jesus

Jesus is Lord, Ruler, and Authority over:

1. Jewish _____
2. Gentile _____
3. The god of _____
4. _____
5. Spiritual _____
6. The _____

Recalibration, Part Two (Chapter 24)

He tells _____ about the _____.

This kingdom values _____ over _____.

The fork in the road, the “put up or shut up”, “do or die” moment:

_____ or _____.

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Matthew 11:6

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

John 6:66

There's only one question left for us today: What happens to your faith when your _____ aren't met?

"My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast—the breaker and destroyer of images. Jesus is the supreme example; he leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins."

—C.S. Lewis

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think was the most disarming thing about Jesus?
2. Could Jesus have done without either of his two missions?
3. What have you rejected or resented because it was unfamiliar?

Teaching Script

There are a couple of words you hear a lot these days: *Creative Destruction*.

- Banking system
- Health care
- Car business
- Quote from “Orbiting the Giant Hairball”—p.51

In Chapters 23-24 of *The Story*, Jesus’ mission is one of creative destruction. In each realm cited above (banking, health care, automobiles) we have reached such a crisis point economically that they all have to be rethought at the foundation level—from the ground up. No previous assumptions about the way these industries used to operate can be taken for granted anymore—everything is on the table as both industry executives and lawmakers start with a blank sheet of paper and reinvent the way things work.

And in Chapters 23-24 of *The Story*, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He also starts with a blank sheet of paper and reinvents the notion of a Messiah, a Deliverer. But it turns out that was just one of His two missions. As He makes his entrance on the scene, there were two critical missions that Jesus had to accomplish.

So today, I want you to hear everything in Chapters 23 and 24 in the context of the dual missions that Jesus had. Everything that happens in these chapters falls under one of two key objectives:

1. ***Shatter* the notion of the long-awaited Messiah.**
2. **To *authenticate* His dominion and authority over all other forces.**

Both of these were absolutely critical.

Recalibration, Part One

First, at the outset of His ministry, everyone was looking in the wrong direction. Israel was anticipating the Messiah would be a world leader, a military force, a revolutionary to restore political power and prominence as in the days of Solomon. The Messiah had been anticipated, promised, and prophesied about for ages, so that now, the expectations for this Deliverer were huge.

But Jesus’ mission was so radically different, so counterintuitive, He found, just like the executive at Hallmark, that He had to effectively start all over, first by destroying these popular characterizations of a man with a cape and a big “S” on his shirt. He had to shatter and then recast and re-purpose this Messiah concept toward his true mission.

Second, He had to validate this new model by demonstrating His power over all obstacles, to authenticate that His absurd claims were actually true.

So, as we go through the events of these chapters, see everything through these lenses. Watch as he simultaneously goes about these two goals: **authenticating** and **shattering**.

First, we see John the Baptist, who definitely marched to a different drummer and, shall we say, lacked a sense of tact or a balanced diet. John was the herald of the Focus of

human history—but we have to ask, “Hey, where did they get this guy?” Why him? John answered their question: “...the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” In other words, I serve as a directional arrow, a sign pointing to the One whose sandals I am unfit to tie.

Now, if you were going to pick some sort of beacon to point people to Jesus, wouldn't you want a very conspicuous one? John was that hard-to-ignore eccentric that signaled Jesus' presence—sort of like those people you see on the side of the street dressed like a mattress and waving a sign about a sale. There's someone close to our home that's dressed like the Statue of Liberty that is this crazy person, doing calisthenics on the side of the road to advertise a tax preparation business.

That was John the Baptist—and for that matter, that's what *we* are called to be: a flare, a flag, a flashing yellow light, a semaphore that signals that the presence of Jesus is in whatever room we occupy. If we are literally the body of Christ, then when we enter a room, it is as if *Jesus* entered the room. John the Baptist's mission was to never fail to point to Jesus.

And so right up front there's Today's Equipping Point:

Never fail to point people to Jesus.

Because when you walk into a room, He walks into a room.

Next we see his first miracle: turning water into wine at a wedding. This wasn't an especially flashy first miracle...you'd think He'd have picked a more public, showy miracle that would at least elicit a golf clap from the crowd. But instead, it was a behind-the-scenes, how-did-that-happen kind of miracle.

I can't help but wonder why. We'll likely never know for sure, but my guess is that this is part of the shattering mission. I think this miracle was the first attempt to recast the Deliverer not as a political animal, or even a party animal, but as the gracious and eternal Bridegroom of the church—the One who provides even the wine, the One who watches over. I believe this miracle was a significant symbol of the role that Jesus will play forever at the marriage feast of the Lamb when He gathers His bride, the church, to Him, and the relationship is consummated by drinking the last cup of the Passover in His presence. Jesus the Messiah, recasting Himself as the husband and provider for His church, turns water into wine.

The next two events are very significant because they happen back-to-back. First, Jesus meets with an expert in the Law, the religious elite, the well-educated Nicodemus. Jesus used a lot of confusing language, especially the part about being “born again.” But His point was this: whoever believes in Him is not condemned. In other words, blessed is he who can look past the unexpectedness of a non-political Messiah and believe He is who He says He is. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have

eternal life in Him.” This is what John the Baptist was saying...this was the Upper Story: everything points to Him.

Then, the very next conversation could not have been more different. It was not at night with a scholar, but in the daytime, in Samaria, with a woman. Jesus moves from esteemed professor to half-breed female in a foreign land. And this time, instead of being “born again,” He speaks of “living water.”

These two consecutive events very clearly shatter the myths and preconceptions of a Superman Messiah. He could not bookend two sequential conversations whose audiences were more different. Jesus is deconstructing the Messiah complex and demonstrating that He is Lord of all, Savior of all: the aristocracy and the riff-raff, male and female, Gentiles AND Jews, Democrats and Republicans, everybody. He wastes absolutely no time in confounding expectations. To Nicodemus, he says all there is, really, is faith—just believe. To the woman, his message is essentially the same: it’s not about worshipping on this mountain, or in Jerusalem—it’s a matter of the heart. Just worship in Spirit and in truth. That’s all—just believe. Two very different conversations, one essential message.

But these two meetings do more than flabbergast their Messiah image—they also demonstrate His Lordship over Jews and Gentiles alike, and there are the first two blanks in the next section on your outline. Jesus seamlessly transitions into His authenticity mission: He is Lord, Ruler and Authority over the **Jewish *elite*** and **Gentile *outcasts***.

Next, He demonstrates His authority over **the god of *this world***. Read with me from page 329 of *The Story*...The third proof of His Lordship was key: even demons obeyed Him.

Next we see the fourth proof of His power and credibility: Lord, Ruler, and Authority over not just people and spirits, but also of ***illness***. From the fever of Peter’s mother-in-law, to the next man with leprosy, to the paralytic lowered through the roof, Jesus demonstrated there was no physical infirmity He could not overcome.

But then He went a step further. As they lowered the paralytic through the hole in the roof, Jesus said to him, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now we have the fifth realm over which Jesus had authority: **spiritual *sickness***. It’s one thing to heal a fever or leprosy—it’s quite another to speak what was considered blasphemy and presume to forgive sins...to heal those with spiritual fever.

And then what does He do next, but broaden His social circle once again, this time having dinner with a tax collector.

Do you see how He is systematically sabotaging every presupposition about this whole Messiah paradigm? Remember again the dual missions:

1. To authenticate His dominion and authority over all other forces
2. Shatter the idea of the long-awaited Messiah.

Jesus is brilliantly accomplishing both missions concurrently. He is cherry-picking the sacred cows over which He has power, while at the same time showing Himself to be a Messiah who was novel, unexpected, and extraordinary.

Then next we see the sixth realm over which Jesus is Lord, Ruler, and Authority. A man with a shriveled hand was in the synagogue, and every neck was straining to see whether Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath. He did, of course, thereby showing Himself to be Lord over **the Law**. The Pharisees had it all wrong—Jesus showed them it wasn't about *legalistic CYA*—it was about doing good, regardless what day it was.

Recalibration, Part Two

Then in Chapter 24, He continues part two of His mission of recalibrating everyone's view of what a Messiah should be. But this time, He tells stories—parables—that start to inform people about “The Kingdom.” This is next on your outline: **He tells stories about the Kingdom**. But surprisingly, He doesn't describe this new kingdom as a political upheaval, a re-ordering of society, or renewed global empire other countries would have to reckon with.

He said the kingdom was like seed scattered on the ground—most people, like most soil, won't receive these seeds, but *some will*—and they'll multiply and produce this radical idea over and over. He said the kingdom is like a mustard seed, seemingly small and insignificant, but when it finds that **good** soil, when it grasps this upside-down solution, it becomes the largest of all plants.

The point was this: **The Kingdom values people over process.**

He said the kingdom values people over process so much, that it's like the foolish shepherd who'd leave 99 safe sheep and look for one that was lost...like a woman who loses a coin and turns her house upside down...like a man who had two sons, and even though the younger was a greedy opportunist and a jerk, his father couldn't wait for him to come back home. That's how important people are in this kingdom.

Just how important are people? A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, attacked and left for dead. Was it the clergy who helped? No, it was someone you'd never expect: a Samaritan, who wasn't blinded by ethnicity and prejudice. Who's your neighbor? Anyone who needs you.

Jesus was saying, “You may think I'm an odd kind of Messiah, but my kingdom is even more so. Because you get to choose whether or not you belong—but once you decide, you can't have it both ways...you can't have two masters, or store up treasures here, or worry about where the next meal is coming from.”

And one more thing: once you hear this intriguing message, if it really captures you, put it in “Drive” and engage. Hearing about this extreme philosophy, but keeping your life in neutral is like building sand castles—they'll be gone with the next tide. But put these uncommon principles into effect and no one can shake your foundation.

First, in Chapter 24, Jesus continued to rock their world with descriptions of this new order, this new worldview, by shattering their Messiah conventions.

Now open to page 343 of *The Story*. Next, Jesus again seamlessly moves back and forth between his two missions, again focusing on His Lordship and Authority. Look at the sequential exhibition of His power over all creation on pages 343-345:

- Nature (calming the waves)
- Spiritual forces of darkness (cut self, Legion, to pigs)
- Debilitating illness (12 yrs bleeding, and she just touched him in faith)
- Death—Jairus' daughter

We need to place a mental bookmark, a mile marker at this juncture, because right here in *The Story* is the turning point. Right here we come to **the fork in the road, the “put up or shut up”, “do or die” moment.** You've heard about this different kingdom, you've seen God's power—now the next move is yours: ***Believe or not.***

From here on, it was all about faith: can you trust that I am who I say I am?

- To Jairus: don't be afraid, just believe
- To the two blind men: Do you believe I'm able to do this?
- There are 5000 hungry people—YOU feed them—I gave you power
- Peter began sinking in the water: O you of little faith!
- I am the bread of life—whoever eats this bread (*believes*) lives forever

In fact, the key to both chapters can be found on page 334 of *The Story*:

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Matthew 11:6

In other words, blessed is he who can think out of the box. Blessed is he who doesn't get tripped up by a Messiah like Me. Blessed is he who can see past his preconceptions and embrace a life of giving away, not acquiring for self. Blessed is he who gets it.

Because here was the sad truth: at the very end of Chapter 24, the Bible says this:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

John 6:66

You can't be lukewarm, or have it both ways, or sit on the fence—complacency is not an option.

And so, in the face of this fanatical, avant-garde Messiah, this revolutionary way of life, **there's only one question left for us to ask today: What happens to your faith when your expectations aren't met?**

Some people, when faced with a decision, try to play both ends, to serve two masters—but Jesus has already addressed that. So what do you do? What happens to your faith when your expectations aren't met? What do you do with a God you can't explain, a Messiah who can't be manipulated into your preferences because you've behaved yourself? A God who won't conform to your stereotypes?

Why do people reject this counter-intuitive Jesus? The same reason they did when they built the golden calf: We prefer our own gods.

Israel had cried out for centuries, asking this God of their fathers to rescue them. The problem was, when He actually showed up, He was not what they'd expected. So what did they do? They traded down for a golden calf, because it was a god of their own design. A god they could see and touch, a god they could feel good about. Their stand-in god suited them just fine. It wouldn't descend on mountaintops in fire and smoke. It

didn't make their knees weak or their hands tremble. Their god of gold wouldn't talk out loud or make demands. They wanted a god they could control, a "preferred" god that never made them feel uncomfortable.

And guess what? As we see through the present day, nothing really changes. I would much prefer that God fix my problem without messing with my paradigm. Today we have built deities of affluence, power, adulation, busyness, and addiction. And as bad as those gods are, they are familiar to us. They serve us, instead of the other way around. We prefer what we know, however dysfunctional, to something new. (P. 101, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*.)

The problem is, God is as demanding as we are—He will do whatever it takes to get our attention. This is what is required to get to that next level we keep talking about: a complete jettison of the gods we prefer, who don't ask too much, and a full embrace of a counter-revolutionary Messiah who will never demand anything less than everything.

Will we give it? That is the question for each of us this morning.

As usual, C.S. Lewis has the perfect thought, the perfect benediction, for our study today:

"My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast—the breaker and destroyer of images. Jesus is the supreme example; He leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins."

—C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

What will we do with this Jesus?

Chapter 25: The Gloves Come Off

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Matthew 11:6

Will you believe, despite your discomfort? Because it turned out most did not:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

John 6:66

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

You have only two options: Believe, or not.

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God metamorphose you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.

Romans 12:2

All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But let me tell you a wonderful secret God has revealed to us. Not all of us will die, but we will all be transformed.

1 Corinthians 15:51

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

John 7:37-39

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

Isaiah 12:3

John 1:14

NIV: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

NT Expanded Translation: And the Word, entering a new mode of existence, became flesh, and lived in a tent [His physical body] among us. And we gazed with attentive and careful regard and spiritual perception at His glory, a glory such as that of a uniquely begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

International Standard Version: The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. We gazed on his glory, the kind of glory that belongs to the Father's unique Son, full of grace and truth.

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."

John 8:12

With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

Matthew 19:26

Is there anyone who can remember this house—the Temple—as it was before? In comparison, how does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all! But now take courage, Zerubbabel, says the LORD. Take courage, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Take courage, all you people still left in the land, says the LORD. Take courage and work, for I am with you, says the LORD Almighty. The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the LORD Almighty.

Haggai 2:3-4, 9

Today's Equipping Point

Cleanse and restore _____

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

Revelation 21:1-5, 22-23

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a moment of truth where you had to stand up and be counted?
2. How can the message be so simple: “Believe in Me and you’ll have life.”
3. Which part of the symbolism of chapter 25 struck you the most?

Teaching Script

Before we begin Chapter 25 of *The Story*, we need to briefly go back and refresh our memory from the end of Chapter 24.

You'll remember last week we talked about not the predicted Messiah who would return Israel to world prominence, but an unexpected, avant-garde, offbeat Messiah who confounded predictions and brought a message of a spiritual kingdom rather than an earthly one. And you'll remember at the end of the lesson, we came to the "fork in the road," a "put up or shut up", a "do or die" moment: You've heard about this different kingdom, you've seen God's power—now the next move is yours:

Believe or not.

And Jesus said:

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Matthew 11:6

Blessed is he who can turn his preconceptions upside-down and not stumble because the Messiah that came is radically different than the one forecasted. Blessed is he who gets it. **Will you believe, despite your discomfort? Because it turned out most did not.** At the moment of truth in John's gospel, the Bible says:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

John 6:66

Now we come to Chapter 25, and, as they say, the gloves come off. The initial winnowing is done. Those who were following just because they got fed have wandered back home. The curiosity seekers have stopped asking for autographs.

Chapter 25 is where the rubber meets the road because those who didn't turn back now have to grapple with the greatest assertion of all: that the man they see in front of them is, in fact, the Son of God. No more speaking in riddles. All bets are off—believe it, don't believe it, but you can't just ignore it.

Here's how C.S. Lewis put the dilemma that faced not just these first century followers, but every single one of us:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Deciding not to decide is not an option. If you're a movie buff, this is the point in the movie when the camera zooms in on the hero's face, and his true character comes out—the moment of truth.

You've seen lots of movies where the tide turns. This is the moment in the third Rocky movie where he's getting beat up, and he uses his teeth to untie and pull off his gloves so he can get serious with Hulk Hogan. This is the climax of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* where Jimmy Stewart defies all odds and continues his filibuster until he literally collapses and hearts are finally changed. This is the moment when Popeye says, "I've had all I can stand, and I can't stand no more," while he downs his spinach. This is the scene in the movie "Gladiator" where Joaquin Phoenix, the emperor, says to Russell Crowe, the Gladiator:

Why doesn't the hero reveal himself and tell your real name? You do have a name?

My name is Gladiator.

"How dare you show your back to me?" the Emperor says. "Slave! You will remove your helmet and tell me your name."

And Russell Crowe turns around, removes his helmet, glares at the emperor, and says, "My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius...commander of the armies of the north...general of the Legions...loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius...father to a murdered son...husband to a murdered wife...**and I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next.**"

Chapter 25 is that moment for Jesus. His identity is revealed beyond a shadow of a doubt. Earlier he would warn those he healed to say nothing, to go show yourself to the priests, as prescribed by law. Now, everything is out in the open. It's crunch time. There can be no more wishy-washy responses, no halfway professions of faith. As we said last week, the ball is now in the people's court:

You have only two options: Believe, or not.

We could do film clips all day on this chapter. This is the scene in the third Indiana Jones movie where the bad guy shoots Indy's father, Sean Connery, and says, "It's time you asked yourself what you really believe."

I want you to listen to the wrestling in this chapter as people tangle with the identity of this Jesus. People agonized over what to think. Listen to their comments:

- "Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him." Some said, "He is a good man." Others replied, "No, he deceives the people."
- "How did this man get such learning without being taught?"
- "Isn't this the man they're trying to kill?"
- "Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah?"
- "When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?"
- Some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." Others said, "He is the Messiah." Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee?"

- Thus the people were divided over Jesus.
- “Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?”

To paraphrase *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, “Who is this guy?”

They are now at the point of decision—conclusions had to be reached—a response was required. And the required response was simple: just believe. Listen to the number of times in Chapter 25 where Jesus spells it out in no uncertain terms:

- “Whoever believes in Me, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”
- “Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness.”
- “If you do not believe that I am He, you will indeed die in your sins.”
- “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”
- “Anyone who believes in Me will live even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”
- “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”
- “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”
- “I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent Me.”
- “Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in Him.”
- “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”
- “Those who believe in Me do not believe in Me only, but in the One who sent me.”
- “No one who believes in Me should stay in darkness.”

It started with the Twelve: *Who do you say that I am?* “You are the Messiah,” Peter answered. And then, for the first of three times, Jesus told them what that meant: He would be killed and rise again. No one will be spared the details. And when Peter took Him aside and said He’d gone a little too far with this Messiah complex, Jesus rebuked the words of Satan that were coming out of Peter. “Wrong! It is for this that I have come!”

But then two interesting things happened. The first was that Jesus took the opportunity to give a discipleship lesson. He said, in essence, the same thing will be required of you. “Whoever wants to be My disciple must take up their cross, die to themselves, and follow Me. Whoever loses their life for Me will save it.” You may think I’m a deranged martyr, willing to throw My life away, but in fact, a very real kind of death awaits you if you are My disciple.

The very next thing that happened was the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John got to see Him up close in all his glory. The Greek word for transfigured is metamorphosis: a complete change in form, structure, and substance—a transformation.

And so Jesus used the first prediction of His death as a teaching point for two things: a death to yourselves awaits you as well, but a glorification you can't imagine into a body you can't imagine also awaits you.

Paul echoed this throughout his letters:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God metamorphose you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.

Romans 12:2

All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But let me tell you a wonderful secret God has revealed to us. Not all of us will die, but we will all be transformed.

1 Corinthians 15:51

Jesus is saying for those who stick around, for those willing to follow, what awaits you is beyond your comprehension.

There were a total of three times in Chapter 25 that Jesus tells His followers that He must be taken to Jerusalem and killed. It's interesting: three predictions of death, three denials by Peter, three days in the tomb, and three questions to restore Peter after the resurrection.

And even though it's not recorded in *The Story*, after each of those other two prophecies about His death, Jesus stops and has a teaching moment similar to the first time. After the first prediction, He says you too must die if you are to live. After the second prediction, the disciples were arguing among themselves who would be greatest in the kingdom, and Jesus picked up a child and put him in the circle and said, "Gentlemen, there is greatness. Become like that."

And after the third prediction, the same thing: James and John just wanted to sit on His right hand and on His left, in positions of power and influence. And Jesus once again taught on humility: "*Whoever desires to be first must be servant of all.*"

The message is the same: it's all about humility.

No more pulling punches: what's coming requires submission, not a sword; not prominence but persecution; and if you're on board, the watchwords are denial of self, death to sin, and humility and servitude. There it is: no more soft shoe.

Jesus speaks hard truths in Chapter 25, but what is just as important, is the backdrop in which He says it. In the life of Jesus, nothing is wasted, and almost every event has a deep symbolic meaning far beneath the telling of the story.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, it's the beginning of the Festival of Tabernacles, or Festival of Booths. You may not have heard much about it, but it was one of the three great festivals the Jews observed every year. It was an annual celebration to commemorate God's deliverance, protection, and provision for Israel while they were wandering in the wilderness after they listened to the 10 intimidated spies instead of Joshua and Caleb. For 40 years they wandered, and both the presence of God and the habitat of his people were tabernacles, or huts, temporary dwellings. This is how He sustained them during this time. So during the feast, there were also great ceremonies around the drawing of water, and the lighting of lamps, because in the desert, God constantly provided the most basic needs of His people: water and light.

Now each year at this festival, people made tabernacles or booths with branches and palms, and lived in them for a week as they remembered God's care for their ancestors. This is really important to understand, because halfway through this festival was when Jesus began to teach in the temple courts. And then, on the last and greatest day, He said in a loud voice,

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

John 7:37-39

Jesus times this perfectly. Because in the Feast of Tabernacles, a golden container filled with water from the pool of Siloam was carried in a procession by the High Priest to the temple. As he arrived, three trumpet blasts were sounded and the people recited Isaiah 12.3:

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

The water symbolized the blessing of adequate rainfall in the desert for their survival. And at this precise moment, Jesus stands and says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."

This great invitation by Jesus is saying that HE is the fulfillment of all the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated. HE is the living water. And right here, we need to push the pause button and go back to the first chapter of John's gospel. Listen to verse 14 in three translations:

John 1:14

NIV: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

NT Expanded Translation: *And the Word, entering a new mode of existence, became flesh, and lived in a tent [His physical body] among us. And we gazed with attentive and careful regard and spiritual perception at His glory, a glory such as that of a uniquely begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

International Standard Version: *The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. We gazed on his glory, the kind of glory that belongs to the Father's unique Son, full of grace and truth.*

At the culmination of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus is the Person of God building His tabernacle among men. Jesus has pitched His tent with us—He has become one of us.

And not only that, He is the giver of living water, so that anyone who believes in Him need not ceremonially draw water, but will have rivers of living water flowing from his heart. Do you see the remarkable symbolism? But there's more...

We discover He is also the sender of the Holy Spirit, who would be God's permanent Tabernacle within all believers, convicting them of sin and leading them into all truth. No more booths, no more palms and branches, because the dwelling of God is now with men.

And as if all this weren't enough, one more significant sign: in the top of page 357 of *The Story*, it 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."

No more lamp-lighting ceremonies either, because the Light of the World has come.

The waiting was over. In the last chapter, He said *I AM the bread of life*. And now, in Chapter 25, *I AM the light of the world*; and *I AM the resurrection and the life*.

Then, "*Before Abraham was, I AM.*" In today's terms, He was now completely "outed." This is how God referred to Himself to Moses. And that was the straw that broke the camel's back. There would be no turning back now. The Pharisees began to formulate a plot to kill Jesus, and everything was set in motion.

And sure enough, in His encounter with the rich young ruler, Jesus demanded exactly what He said He would: everything. Come and die to what you have been...and sadly the man left. Who then can be saved, asked His disciples? The reply is the key verse of the chapter:

With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

Matthew 19:26

Salvation is completely a God-thing.

Then Jesus resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem and allowed the crowds, who would later turn on Him, to honor Him at the Triumphal Entry. But because everything was fair game now, after the procession, He went straight to the temple courts and drove out the moneychangers and extortionists to make room for the prayer warriors, the blind, the lame, and the children. This was His house, and sure enough, the prophecy from back in Chapter 19 came true. You remember when Zerubbabel led the first 50,000 Jews back from Persia to rebuild the temple, they were upset that it would never come close to the glory of Solomon's temple.

Remember what Haggai said?

"Is there anyone who can remember this house—the Temple—as it was before? In comparison, how does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all! But now take courage, Zerubbabel," says the LORD. "Take courage, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Take courage, all you people still left in the land, says

the LORD. Take courage and work, for I am with you,” says the LORD Almighty. “The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory,” says the LORD Almighty.

Haggai 2:3-4, 9

The prophecy came true: this temple far outshone Solomon's, because Jesus Himself, the source of living water, the light of the world, He who made a tabernacle with men...He Himself cleansed this temple and restored it, in the last week of His life, to a house of worship.

And it's from this prophecy that we get our Equipping Point for today:

Cleanse and restore your temple.

If we are to lead our families to a closer relationship with God, the Holy Spirit must be unobstructed in His work through us. And the only way to do that is to allow our temple to be cleansed through confession of our weaknesses, and redeemed by the Holy Spirit who not only brings that conviction, but then comes along side, as *Paraclete* (John 16) to walk with us, teach us, and restore His dwelling place.

What a week in the life of Jesus: a week of revelation, high symbolism, and fulfillment of prophecy.

But there's just one more thing we can't miss about this chapter. This is not the end of this discussion about the tabernacle, or water, or light. It's only the first fulfillment—there will be a second. Jesus shows Himself to be the embodiment of moving into the neighborhood, of God making His home with men, and the capstone of the Feast of Tabernacles. But even this is not the end of the story—even this last week of Jesus' life points to something more, something greater: it points to the end of time, when the tabernacle made within us by the Holy Spirit is superseded in the New Jerusalem:

Read with me from Revelation 21:

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

And then John said:

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

Revelation 21:1-5, 22-23

Chapter 25 is stunning in its unflinching portrayal of Jesus as completely human and completely divine—the one true Son of God. He was present as the tabernacles were first built on the plains of the Middle East; He fulfilled every facet of the Feast of Tabernacles the week of His death, and later He would send the Holy Spirit into each believer. The tabernacle was now within.

But in the *New* Jerusalem, there will be no temple, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple, and God Himself will hand out the Kleenex just once...to wipe away every tear, as the former things pass away, and the Lamb illuminates our resurrected bodies forever. This is the great promise of chapter 25 of the Story—the promise of Christ Himself—the promise to all who believe.

Chapter 26: The Hour of Darkness

Today's Equipping Point:

Practice _____

Covenant elements

1. You “_____” a covenant, because it involved shedding blood.
2. Second, an _____ or _____ laid out expectations of both parties.
3. Third, there was an exchange of _____.
4. Then a _____ was required.
5. Then an _____ was built, as an outward reminder.
6. The parties then usually shared a _____.
7. And last, _____ often occurred.

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

Matthew 26:27-28

The Old Testament atoning process was _____:

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 7:18-19, 8:7, 10:3-4, 9:9-10

Concerning Jesus:

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Hebrews 10:8-12

Isaiah 52:14

NIV: Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.

GNT: Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.

The Message: Everyone was appalled. He didn't even look human— a ruined face, disfigured past recognition.

NLT: Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person.

Psalm 22

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*

⁸ *"He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.*

*Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."*

¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.*

*My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.*

¹⁵ *My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.*

¹⁶ *Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.*

¹⁷ *I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.*

¹⁸ *They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.*

¹⁹ *But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.*

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus have to die?
2. What have His wounds healed you from?
3. How does it make you feel to be so indebted to a Person? What is your response?

Teaching Script

[Play a clip from the movie Titanic showing how characters spent their last few minutes.]

If you knew the time of your death, how would you spend your last hours?

It's an age-old question, but as we face the darkest hour in human history, the impending death of the Lamb of God, it bears repeating. In the movie *Titanic*, we learned much from the different characters' actions in the last moments of their lives. The captain, in total denial, entombed himself in the Conn. The ship's architect, in a meaningless gesture, adjusts the minute hand on a mantle clock. An older husband and wife, scared and only seconds from drowning, held each other close. A mother, knowing the imminent danger but wanting to spare her children a few moments of sheer terror, reads to them quietly. And amid total chaos on the deck, a string quartet plays a hymn that is all but ignored, but gives a backdrop of dignity and grace to the scene.

Knowing that His time had come, Jesus spent His last few hours with His disciples. Scripture tells he knew everything that was going to happen to him. His dread was so palpable that even as an angel came and ministered to Him, His horror at enduring the full fury of God was such that he sweated drops of blood. This condition, known as *hematidrosis*, is the effusion of blood from veins. Under extreme distress, capillaries just under the skin dilate and burst, mingling blood with sweat. When He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," it was literal.

Under these conditions, with this mental and emotional burden to carry Himself, let's observe how Jesus spent His last hours:

- He abandoned all pride, all dignity—and washed their feet. It wasn't enough that He would be humiliated beyond measure in a few hours, being displayed on the cross like a piece of meat hung up at the butchers. He chose on His own to embrace humility and wash the feet of those who would deny Him, even the one who would betray Him. Humility had been the key teaching in the last week of His life; He had to squelch arguments about who was greatest among the disciples, and who would sit on His right hand and His left. But in a stunning gesture, He silenced those childish squabbles by performing a service usually left to the lowest slave, and then said, "Go and do likewise."
- He focused on their peace and comfort, not His own. They had no idea what was coming, but instead of turning inward and becoming self-absorbed, He spoke words of encouragement to them, men who couldn't understand now, but who would need these words later. Listen to his compassion:

"Don't let your hearts be troubled...(THEIR hearts!)...I will come back and take you with me...you will do even greater things than I have...you may ask for anything in my name and I will do it...you will receive another advocate to help you and be with you forever...I have told you these things that you may have peace...Take heart! I have overcome the world."

Had His disciples known what was coming, the absurd claim that He had “overcome the world” would have been the worst kind of low comedy.

What must they have thought later as those words rung in their ears... “I have overcome the world”... while the professional torturers systematically removed flesh and muscle from his body? “I have overcome the world” as they watched this mangled body fastened with nails to a 200-pound piece of wood as entertainment for soldiers who rolled dice for his clothes? “I have overcome the world” indeed.

- But not only did he abandon all pride, and focus on His followers rather than Himself, He affirmed the one timeless relationship He had—the same one that was about to be broken. He said He was in the Father and the Father was in Him. He said the Father was doing His work in Jesus. He said the Spirit will come to help, to advocate, to lead into truth. Just hours before this eternal, perfect community was temporarily severed, as Jesus took on the sins of the world, He reaffirmed it and promised its blessing to His disciples.
- And finally, He prayed for them.

The selflessness of Jesus was never more apparent than here, where His final hours were focused not on Himself, but on those He had taught and nurtured the last three years.

And there’s our Equipping Point for today, our key to leading well.

Practice selflessness.

If Jesus, at a time so intense and stressful that He sweat blood, could think more of His disciples and their well-being than Himself, could you and I this week lay aside our self-pity, our occasional wallowing, and focus on our family, on others? Regardless of your encounter with the boss earlier? Regardless of the pressure to “get ahead?” Regardless of the emotional baggage we carry with us on a daily basis? Might you and I consider, as servant-leaders, to pray intentionally for others, to somehow wash their feet, regardless of our own pressures? To do so would be to emulate Jesus in a striking way—even if no one else knew about it!

The Passover was approaching so they prepared a customary feast. But this was no ordinary Passover meal; Jesus was about to change history. He took the unleavened bread and cup of wine from the Passover meal and instituted the New Covenant. This moment was the fulfillment of all the covenants and agreements throughout history. We need to pay close attention to the nature of this promise.

A covenant was more than a bargain or gentleman’s agreement. You’ll remember the elements of a covenant from when we studied Abraham back in September—these are on your outline:

1. First, you didn't "make" a covenant; you "**cut**" a covenant, because it **involved shedding blood**. To this day we still say we "cut a deal" to describe a commitment we expect to honor.
2. Second, **an oath or promise laid out the expectations of both parties**.
3. **Third, there was an exchange of clothing**, representing an assumption of identities. Sometimes the parties would exchange belts, because belts often held swords and other forms of protection, and this signified protection for your covenant partner.
4. **Then a blood sacrifice was required**. You'll remember that this was a large animal that was cut in two mirror slices from head to tail. The parties dug a shallow trench, and laid the two halves on either side of the trench, allowing the blood to flow into it. Then the partners would lift their robes and walk through the blood-filled trench to symbolize the gravity of their commitment, as if to say, "May this happen to me if I break this covenant."
5. Often **an external sign was built**, such as an altar or pillar of stones as **an outward reminder**.
6. **The parties then usually shared a meal**, usually of bread and the sacrificed animal. A meal was a sign of trust and intimacy—it would have been unthinkable to betray someone with whom you had dined.
7. **And last, name changes often occurred** to reflect the "oneness" of this covenant. Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and of course in the marriage covenant, the wife takes on the husband's surname.

In Matthew's account of the Last Supper, Jesus said:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Matthew 26:27-28

Yes, in fact, this was a true covenant...look back at those 7 elements on your outline:

1. Jesus said, "This is *My* blood of the covenant." The promise was "cut."
2. The promise or oath was clear: He came to give His life as a ransom—and your part is, as we said last week, to believe—to believe He is the Son of God.
3. There was an exchange of clothing: Jesus became man and then dressed Himself with a towel as a servant. Believers are to take on Christ's identity and He took on ours. We're called to don our own towels and serve others.
4. The blood sacrifice: Christ Himself was the animal cut in two. And then God Himself walked between the halves, in the blood-filled trench, taking full responsibility for the covenant, because we could never uphold our end. God has arranged it such that salvation is His thing, a work He did through Jesus' sacrifice, a covenant He seals with His Holy Spirit.
5. The sign or the witness of this covenant is baptism: the outward expression of the inward transformation—dying to self and resurrected to a new life with new focus, new priorities, and a new purpose. Baptism is an altar built to commemorate the sacrifice of our lives.

6. The last meal Jesus shared with His disciples is a meal that we repeat with the bread and the wine at communion. Christians celebrate this symbolic meal as a sign of our covenant relationship. Just as a meal together is a sign of trust and intimacy, so Jesus asks that we remember Him as His Spirit joins us together by nourishing our souls as we eat and drink.
7. And just as a bride's name changes at the covenant of marriage, so Jesus does the same for us. He said in Revelation:
"To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it."

Revelation 2:17

What was about to take place fulfilled not just the covenant with Abraham, but the Passover that freed the Jews from Egypt. And do you remember that the ninth plague in Egypt, the one that preceded the 10th plague of death, was the plague of darkness? I don't think it's any accident that darkness was the ninth plague, just before they sacrificed the Passover Lamb and spread its blood on their doorpost. Because on the day Jesus died, darkness covered the whole land from noon until 3 p.m. Josephus the historian tells us that on Passover Fridays, the lambs were typically slaughtered right about 3 p.m., before twilight, so there would be ample time to complete all the preparations before the Sabbath started at 6 p.m. At this moment, Jesus painted His blood on the doorpost of heaven, and freedom was delivered to everyone in slavery to sin.

The importance of this perfect sacrifice cannot be overstated. From the time the Law was given to Moses, the process of atoning for the people's sins was temporary—**the Old Testament atoning process was a stopgap measure**. Listen to the Hebrew writer in three places:

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 7:18-19, 8:7, 10:3-4, 9:9-10

In other words, think of the Old Testament system of atonement as a dialysis machine. The rituals of sacrificing animals, utilizing the scapegoat, and the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies once a year was a provisional remedy to cleanse God's people of their sins, much like a dialysis machine is a stopgap measure to cleanse the blood. Without functioning kidneys, an external process is required to intervene and provide purification.

But Jesus provided the internal remedy. Jesus is the kidney transplant that purifies us from the inside, not through ceremonial washings and external practices.

Listen again to the Hebrew writer describing Jesus:

First he said, *Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them* (although the law required them to be made).

Then he said, *Here I am, I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*

Hebrews 10:8-12

And what did this once-for-all-time, turnkey, perfect solution cost? Unimaginable pain, complete humiliation, and, of course, His life. Most of us have probably seen *The Passion of the Christ* movie, but some scholars suggest it was even worse than that. To bear on His body the full fury of the wrath of God for all of humanity's sins, His sacrifice wasn't going to be quick and painless. For there to be justice, for God to be God and judge the sin of the world, more was required. Isaiah says,

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all...It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

Isaiah 53:5-6, 10

Most of us are familiar with Isaiah 53, as hard as it is to read. But fewer people know about the previous chapter, Isaiah 52.14, where it says:

Isaiah 52:14

NIV: *Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness*
GNT: *Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.*

The Message: *Everyone was appalled. He didn't even look human— a ruined face, disfigured past recognition.*

NLT: *Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person.*

John 18 says that Jesus knew *ahead of time* everything that was going to happen to Him. So it's not hard to imagine why those capillaries burst and His sweat was like drops of blood—why He said his soul was in anguish to the point of death. It's not hard to imagine the words of Psalm 22, as the Messiah speaks through David. Read with me:

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*
⁸ *"He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."*
¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*
¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.*
¹⁵ *My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.*
¹⁶ *Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.*
¹⁷ *I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.*
¹⁸ *They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.*
¹⁹ *But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.*

As He was suspended between heaven and earth, the best that God had to offer endured the **worst** that man could dish out. No form of death was worse than crucifixion, because it could last for days. Exposure to the elements, the insects, even the birds of prey took a back seat to the cycle of suffocation trading on excruciating pain. Hanging suspended from the wrists, it was possible to inhale but not to exhale. When the lungs finally began to burst, the victim would bear down on his nailed feet, causing spasms as he slowly pushed himself high enough to exhale. But when your back was already hamburger, pushing yourself up a rough wooden beam would strip off any remaining flesh and muscle, exposing bone and possibly even organs. Now imagine repeating this as often as you needed to breathe, and you get some idea of the Roman expertise in inflicting as much pain as possible while prolonging the final relief of death. Jesus, substituting for us, took this as His punishment.

For 25 weeks now we've been pointing to this moment. We've said that the name of Jesus has been whispered throughout the Old Testament. We've seen Jesus as precisely the Messiah the world needed, but the opposite of what they expected. And now, on this day, everything converges: the covenant of Abraham and the animal cut in two, the Passover Lamb and the wood stained with blood, the Psalm of David, and the disturbing, graphic prophecy of Isaiah all come together on a day called, of all things, Good Friday.

On this day, darkness eclipsed the land as sin overtook the Light of the world. For the first time in eternity, Jesus was forsaken by His Father. At that moment, in the temple, the priest lifted his knife to slaughter the sacrificial lamb, while on the cross, the Lamb of God gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice. He uttered the cry for which all of history had longed: “It is finished.”

Jesus had done what He’d come to do. Redemption had been purchased, and the debt of sin was fully paid. The mob that was present witnessed a Lower Story drama: the execution of a supposed dissident. A handful of the faithful saw the cruelty of Lower Story injustice. But God saw the culmination of an Upper Story plan that had been drawn up before the foundations of the world.

And for that reason only, that history converged on this day as the will of God...for that reason only, it is not blasphemy to speak of this day as “Good Friday.” Because this was no surprise ending—it was only the beginning. It was justice, and it was mercy. And it set the stage for the greatest miracle of all.

Chapter 27: He is Risen!

1. We've got to see the _____.

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Job 19:25-27

For You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay,

Psalm 16:10

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:2-3

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand."

Isaiah 53:10

Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

John 14:19

2. The _____ of the resurrection.

If Christ was not resurrected then your faith is worthless and you and I are still dead in our sins. For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.

But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again. Everyone dies because all of us are related to Adam, the first man. But all who are related to Christ, the other man, will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised first; then when Christ comes back, all his people will be raised.

Just as we are now like Adam, the man of the earth, so we will someday be like Christ, the man from heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:13-14, 17-20, 22-23, 49

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Hebrews 2:14-15

The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:26

#1 { *When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!”*

Luke 5:4-8

#2 { *“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*

John 21:3-6

3. Even the _____ act of worship can lead to life-changing release.

The most radical thing you can do for God, is the _____
He tells you to do.

Today's Equipping Point

Take one small step of _____

“For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much...”

Luke 7:47

➔ Forgiveness is _____—Jesus had already forgiven Peter before the conversation. Forgiveness that’s conditional is just _____.

➔ When others accuse us, or betray us, our response cannot be _____.
It’s never as important to be _____ as it is to be _____.

➔ Your response to an injustice is a key indicator of your _____ for ministry.

Discussion Questions

1. How has *The Story* given you a “big picture” you didn’t have before?
2. To what failure in your life has Jesus responded, “Feed my sheep”?
3. How can you change your attitude/outlook to be more fruitful in ministry?

Teaching Script

They were ashamed, afraid, and absent. Mere hours after they pledged never to leave Jesus—even to die with Him—the Eleven were nowhere near the cross as the sun began to set. But the Roman soldiers were still there, and pierced his side to prove Jesus was very, very dead. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were an unlikely duo show up at the cross. These two members of the Sanhedrin shed their secret discipleship and took responsibility for burying Jesus' body. Wrapping Him in enough spices for a king, they laid him in a nearby tomb. Remembering Jesus' words, the Jewish authorities and Pilate secured the tomb and posted a guard there to keep the 3-day resurrection story from gaining any traction.

Early Sunday morning, a small band of faithful women carrying spices approached His tomb, wondering who could remove the rock that sealed the entrance. Imagine their shock as an angel announced to them that Jesus was not there, "He is risen, just as He said!" Hearing the news, Peter and John sprinted to the tomb. They, too, found it empty. As Mary Magdalene remained there weeping, Jesus appeared to her.

Later the same day, an unrecognized Jesus approached two downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus. They said all of Jerusalem was abuzz with the events of the last three days, and the One whom they had trusted to redeem Israel had been crucified, and they were disappointed. Some silly women even had an unbelievable angelic vision, and the tomb was empty. With all these confusing stories, what's a guy to do except head home to Emmaus? Jesus admonished the two for their unbelief, and then He used Moses and the Prophets to teach them about the Messiah. After eating with them, when their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, He disappeared from their sight. But they finally got it! With a lot of tutoring, they finally got it! So they headed back to Jerusalem at full speed to report their experience to the Eleven. Then Jesus appeared to them as well, and after assuring them He was not a ghost, He did the same thing again: He re-explained the Old Testament in light of all that had happened, and opened their minds so they too finally understood.

This brings us to point #1 on your outlines:

1. We've got to see the *big picture*.

[Hold up The Story]

What Jesus did, both for the disciples headed to Emmaus, and for the Eleven, was to tell them "*The Story*"—he contextualized everything that had happened so they could understand the purpose for which he had died, and then raised. Because they had seen Jesus through the lens of the Messiah they wanted and expected, these events made no sense at all. A military or political Deliverer would never make his demise the point of his mission.

But Jesus took them to "hot-air balloon level" to see the big picture. He helped them see that Israel had never kept the Law very well even on their best days. And when they didn't, they had this makeshift, stopgap mechanism to cleanse people of their sins, which had to be repeated over and over again. It never quite did the job, but it was a precursor to a once-for-all, permanent atonement. This one-time sacrifice wouldn't just address the

problem of sins over the last year, but would provide forgiveness prospectively, covering all the sins you would commit in the future, justifying the believer once for all time.

What He had done was to put everything they knew from Jewish historical writings into context and a frame of reference that made sense to them. As He told them “*The Story*”, the light bulbs over their heads started turning on.

It wasn't like a resurrection was a foreign topic. There are several Scriptures from the Old Testament that alluded to it.

Maybe He quoted Job:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Job 19:25-27

Perhaps he quoted David:

For You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

Psalms 16:10

Peter later referred to this passage in his powerful Pentecost sermon.

Maybe He reminded them of the angel's words to Daniel:

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:2-3

Perhaps even His own Suffering Servant prophecy in Isaiah:

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

Isaiah 53:10

For sure, I'm guessing that Jesus reminded them of His words just three days before:

Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

John 14:19

This leads us right into the second key point:

2. The centrality of the resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is, after all, a non-negotiable. Without it, the gospel just crumbles into just another hyped up tale of a guy who claimed to be a god. But we see the resurrection is even more than the cornerstone of the gospel: by Jesus' grace, it is ***the inheritance of every believer***.

Read with me from 1 Corinthians:

If Christ was not resurrected then your faith is worthless and you and I are still dead in our sins.

1 Corinthians 15:17

For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world.

But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again. Everyone dies because all of us are related to Adam, the first man. But all who are related to Christ, the other man, will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised first; then when Christ comes back, all his people will be raised.

Just as we are now like Adam, the man of the earth, so we will someday be like Christ, the man from heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:13-14, 17-20, 22-23, 49

Jesus' resurrection means for each one of us that our death, while certain, need not be permanent. The two resurrections, Christ's and ours, stand or fall together. Only by dying could He then be raised, and in conquering death, He showed us we could as well, because Satan was stripped and rendered powerless over the destiny of those who believed. Hebrews says:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Hebrews 2:14-15

because...

The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:26

Jesus broke Satan's power over spiritual death on the cross, and then in the empty tomb. And later, at the end of time, Satan will be permanently divested of his power over death when Jesus delivers the kingdom to his Father and the New Jerusalem descends from heaven.

It's really important to see the big picture, and to understand the centrality of the resurrection.

But we should also pay attention to the events surrounding Jesus' appearances after He rose—because it's in those conversations we find healing, salve for the wounds of our sin, and miracles to inspire us to be witnesses for Him the rest of our lives. Remember we've said before that Jesus wastes nothing—and true to form, these post-resurrection encounters are rich with meaning and depth.

You'll remember that after His appearance to the Eleven, Jesus appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee.

It's not often Jesus performed the same miracle twice, but in the beginning of Luke's gospel and the end of John's, He book-ended his ministry with similar miracles. The first time was in Luke 5: Jesus had been preaching and He got into Peter's boat. Here's what happened:

*When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “**Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.**” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!”*

Luke 5:4-8

And now here's the second time, after the Resurrection. One morning Peter said,

*“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. He said, “**Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.**” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*

John 21:3-6

Look at the significance of what happened: both times the disciples were just making a living. Both times, despite their years of experience and expertise, they caught nothing. And both times, they were asked to defy logic and do something seemingly meaningless.

But both times, absurd as it sounded, the fishermen did as they were told, and both times, miracles happened. This brings us to our **third key point**:

3. Even the smallest act of worship can lead to life-changing release.

Someone once told me **the most radical thing you can do for God, is the very next thing He tells you to do.** For Peter it was a simple act of obedience that rationally made no sense at all. Both times, as they obeyed, miracles happened, and Peter had a ministry he could never have imagined, all because he said yes. All because God can use even the smallest, most insignificant act of worship to change the world.

And for us, that's our **Equipping Point for today**:

Take one small step of obedience.

It may seem silly, like throwing your nets on the other side. Maybe for you it's slowing down to half-pace as you walk through the office or stopping to check on someone. Maybe it's a small bouquet of flowers for your wife for no reason at all. Maybe it's turning off the car stereo and praying on the way home to leave your workday behind. Take one small step of service, of worship, and just see how God can multiply it.

After that breakfast, though, there was one more life-changing encounter.

After they had eaten, Jesus faced down the elephant in the room (or maybe *on the beach*). He knew this conversation with Peter would be awkward and uneasy. Peter had seen Jesus after the resurrection at least twice, perhaps three times, and the subject still hadn't come up. Surely Peter had already beaten himself up over and over for his denials. We can suppose that Peter had real doubt as to where he stood with Jesus. This was a man who would just as soon ignore the elephant, than have to face it.

But when it was time, it's important to notice that Jesus did NOT say "I told you so." He also didn't ask, "How much have you wept? How often have you repented? How much fasting have you done?" Jesus kindly spoke of no probation for Peter's denial, no halfway house, no required restitution.

He only asked, "*Do you love Me?*"

Do you remember the woman who entered the Pharisee's house where Jesus was eating, and anointed His feet with oil? Remember how indignant the Pharisee was that such a woman had touched Jesus? Do you recall Jesus' response?

For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much...

Luke 7:47

Much is forgiven her, not because she wept much, or because she spent much, but because she loved much.

Before Jesus would commit his sheep to Peter's care, He asked him, "Do you love Me?" It was a simple question, but really, for a God of grace, it was the only question that mattered. Those that do not truly love Jesus will never truly love others, nor will they care for others as they should. Nothing but the love of Christ would compel someone to go through the difficulties and discouragements of ministry, of shepherding others, of feeding sheep.

Jesus was gracious enough to put him out of his pain, and confirmed his place as an apostle.

Here Jesus has taught us several things:

- ➔ **Forgiveness is unconditional—He had already forgiven Peter before this conversation.** For those who have wronged *us*, can we say our forgiveness is independent of their response? I recently had a very difficult conversation—one that was wrenching, and filled with heartache. But I was reminded ahead of time that whatever the response, whatever the outcome, *forgiveness cannot be conditional*. **Forgiveness that's conditional is just fair warning.**

➔ **When others accuse us, or betray us, our response cannot be punitive.** Taking your pound of flesh after an offense can be temporarily satisfying, but what you are fracturing is the body of Christ. Believe me; I can attest to this personally, as can many of you. I've said this more than once, but we need to write this down as well: **It's never as important to be right as it is to be loving.** Even if we can prove you are right about something, we must lay that aside; it matters more to be loving and forgiving.

And the last thing we learn from this encounter:

➔ **Your response to an injustice is a key indicator of your fitness for ministry.** When Jesus asks us, "Do you love me?" He is asking us not just for our own benefit, but also for the benefit of our sheep—those who lie in our path. I was sharing this difficult conversation I just mentioned with a friend, and they said, "Well, I guess now you're going to have to practice what you preach." I hate it when people are actually listening.

If Jesus, the Perfect High Priest, restores the fallen with a spirit of humility, then certainly we, who are sinful and corrupt, must forgive our brothers and sisters with the same spirit of grace, humility, and awareness of our own imperfections.

Then, finally, it was time for Jesus to go. At His ascension, the Eleven met Him on a Galilean mountain where He commissioned them to continue to carry out His mission by saying, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

As God, Jesus had all authority to now commission His disciples to carry out the building up of His new community of believers. They could accomplish their mission because as Emmanuel, He would be with them to do so. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ vindicated Him as the Son of God. It is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and the climax of God's great story of redemption. The redemptive work was finished, but now there was more work to do to spread the good news.

But it makes you stop and think: Are these really the ones we want to entrust this great story of redemption to? The disciples who never really understood His mission, who denied Him, who were shocked when He rose from the dead just as He said He would? These men were fearful, doubting, wounded skeptics...is this really the foundation you want for your church?

The answer, of course, is absolutely. They were just the ones to carry it out. Why? Because fearful, doubting, wounded people need a Savior. They know they need a Savior. And more than that, their fear, their doubt, and their wounds make them just like us. We see ourselves in these men to whom the Gospel was entrusted. And now, we are the ones to conquer our fear; we are the ones to believe despite doubt; we are the ones whose wounds have been healed by his stripes. We are the ones who have been entrusted with this priceless, matchless message: He lives!

THE STORY

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON GUIDE

[Prayer]

Lord Jesus, live anew in each man here. Help us to kill what is bitter, and unforgiving, and fearful, and doubting within us, that a Resurrected Savior is seen today in every room we enter, in every person we touch, in every word we say.

Today we claim the power that raised Jesus from the dead, as the power that has given us new life, and will raise us up on that last day to live with Him forever.

Chapter 28: New Beginnings

Acts is a book of _____.

Names were always inextricably tied to _____ and _____.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.

John 17:11-12

1. Jesus said to _____ in His name.
2. What thoughts are invoked in others by the mention of _____?

The second undeniable theme throughout the book of Acts is the _____.

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.

Ephesians 1:13-14

A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church. To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another he gives the gift of special knowledge. The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else he gives the power to heal the sick. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and to another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another spirit that is speaking. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, and another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

1 Corinthians 12:7-11

Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:13

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Matthew 3:11

One key role of the Spirit for all: the Spirit as *paraclete*.

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another [Helper/Counselor/Advocate/Friend/Comforter] to be with you forever.

John 14:16

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an [Advocate/Helper/Priest-Friend/one who speaks for us] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

1John 2:1

- He stands _____, as to plead a defendant's case in a court of law.
- He helps us in our weaknesses to _____.

The Spirit helps us with our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we should. But the Spirit himself speaks to God for us, even begs God for us with deep feelings that words cannot explain. God can see what is in people's hearts. And he knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit speaks to God for his people in the way God wants.

Romans 8:26-27

- The *paraclete* is our Helper and Advocate before the _____.

But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you at that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speaks, but the Holy Spirit.

Mark 13:11

- He is a source of _____.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us."

Romans 8:35,37

The Lord will keep all his promises; he is loyal to all he has made. The Lord helps those who have been defeated and takes care of those who are in trouble.

Psalms 145:13-14

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:17-18

- The *paraclete* is the one who gives _____ in times of battle.

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 3:16

Today's Equipping Challenge:

With whom do you need to _____?

Discussion Questions

1. What one name, when you hear it, for good or bad, evokes the most emotion in you?
2. What can we do to unleash the incredible power of the Holy Spirit already present within us?
3. Which role of the *paraclete* do you most need at the moment?

Teaching Script

When you come right down to it, aren't we all in an in-between place? We know that we are foreigners in a strange land, and our real home lies elsewhere. But in each of our Lower Stories, we frequently find ourselves saying, "In the meantime...at least for now..." Some of us are in an in-between time professionally; some are recovering from wounds, professional, emotional or spiritual, and need an in-between place to heal, to re-equip ourselves for the journey ahead. Some of us are in an adjustment time that requires we rearrange our priorities, because we suddenly find ourselves with children, or maybe without children, or maybe without a job.

If you think you might currently be an in-between person in an in-between time, then Acts is just the book for you. In this book, Luke chronicles the passage from one era to another, and all the things that change in this revolution called Christianity.

In this book, we have deserters turning into outspoken, single-minded preachers. We have a brief time of waiting followed by a stunning moment of empowerment and conviction. We have a New Community that shared everything, sacrificed for each other and had favor with outsiders.

We see these previously frightened disciples now performing some of the same miracles Jesus did, and then being thankful that they had the privilege of suffering for Jesus' name. We have a man named Stephen selected because he was "full of the Holy Spirit" and wise, who tragically became the first martyr for this new movement. We see his death as a catalyst to persecution that drove the gospel message out of Jerusalem and into Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. We see a dyed-in-the-wool, foam-at-the-mouth legalist like Saul have a literal come-to-Jesus moment, and then be commissioned to be the uttermost parts of the earth mouthpiece. We see eyes opened and paradigms destroyed as Peter and Cornelius form the first Odd Couple and thereby open salvation to the Gentiles, which paved the way for Paul to then *go* to those uttermost places and preach the Gospel.

Acts is a book of *transitions*...

- Ministry of Jesus to ministry of apostles
- Hiding to boldness
- Presence of Jesus to presence of Holy Spirit
- Old covenant to New
- Israel as God's chief witness to the Church
- The place of worship from synagogues to churches in homes
- Jews to Gentiles
- Circumcision to baptism (Acts 10)
- Jerusalem to rest of world
- Law to grace

No wonder Acts is called the book of transitions. As the gospel was intended to transform the heart, it's fitting that the first book to chronicle this new life in Jesus is a book of evolution and passage from old to new, from centralized to de-centralized, from closed-minded to free-thinking.

But for all the things that do change in Acts, there's one crucial thing that does not change: God's character and His plan

In fact, Luke went to great pains in his narrative to ensure his readers understood the unchanging nature of the God who was bringing about this revolution. And he did it by focusing on one thing: the Name of Jesus.

The name of Jesus is so powerful, Paul says, that at the sound of it every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Thirty-two times in the book of Acts alone the name of Jesus is used with its power to heal, to baptize, to suffer for, to claim the authority of God Himself.

In Biblical times, there was one thing that reflected and described someone's character and mission more than anything else: their name.

In the Bible, a name refers to "nature," because names were given to reveal something about the person. At the ratification of His covenant with Abram, God changed "Abram" (Exalted Father) to "Abraham" (Father of the Multitudes). God told Abraham and Sarah to name their long-awaited son *Isaac*, because when Sarah and Abraham were told their child would be born at the assisted-living center, they laughed. God joined in with the joke when He said to name their boy Isaac, which means "laughter." Jacob was a schemer, trickster and con man, and his name means "to take by the heel," i.e., to trip up, to deceive (Gen. 25:26). Later though, the angel would rename him "Israel" which means "Prince with God." Remember Hosea the prophet, who was told to go marry the prostitute Gomer? Their children's names were not Jennifer, Tiffany and Michael. They were "God will scatter", "No mercy", and "Not my people."

Names were always inextricably tied to *character* and *mission*. Today, it would be as if the name "Max" had a Latin root meaning "preacher of Jesus", or the name "Randy" was translated "lover of neighborhoods."

Listen to a few of the times the name of Jesus is mentioned in Chapter 28 of *The Story*:

- Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...
- Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"
- By faith in the name of Jesus, this man (the cripple) was made strong.
- It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him.
- The High Priest questioned them saying, "By what power or what name did you do this?"
- Resp: "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed."
- Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.
- Sanhedrin: We must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.
- They commanded them not to teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus.
- After they were jailed, rulers said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name."
- After flogging them, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus.

- The apostles left, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.
- After Saul's Damascus road experience, God told Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Why so many references to the power of the Name? Because for all the transitions we mentioned in Acts, for all the momentous things that were changing, one thing stood immovable and with no shadow of turning: the character and mission of God. The great Upper Story had just been revealed in Christ, but it was important for the disciples to see that God, who had set this great Upper Story of Jesus in motion back in the Garden of Eden, who had spoken through His Son, was the same God who would bless them and empower them through the Holy Spirit. His name reflects His unchangeable nature. Just as He told Moses to tell Pharaoh that "I AM" had sent him, so in the Gospels, Jesus claimed that name for Himself, as the unchanging, never-wavering God of the universe.

Remember Jesus' prayer for His disciples?

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me.

John 17:11-12

This matters today for two reasons:

1. **Jesus said to ask anything in His name.** As we pray for healing for others, for release of demonic oppression, for His glory to be revealed through us, it's as if we have at our disposal this nuclear energy source that fuels and ignites the prayers of the saints. The power of His name is unlike any other, as we summon that power to intercede for others. This is not to be taken lightly, as we barrel through the end of a prayer, "in Jesus' name amen." Covering our prayers in the name of Jesus invokes power, authority, and dominion given Him by the Father. So if we take away nothing else this morning, let us pause at the end of our prayers to contemplate the force we are begging to unleash at the mention of His Name—and let us pray believing He is faithful to that promise.
2. Second, it causes us to ask the question: **What thoughts are invoked in others by the mention of our name?** If after I have left this church, someone mentions my name and the typical reaction is (roll eyes), then it's not just *my* name, but the name of *Christ* that I wear that has also suffered loss. Has God been honored by the legacy of my name? Of yours? In your world, in your office, what comes to people's mind at the mention of your name? Something to consider....

The focus on the character of the name of God assured the disciples. But what could have transformed them from faint-hearted to faith-filled? From enfeebled to empowered?

The work of the Holy Spirit. **The second undeniable theme throughout the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit.** The Spirit takes center stage in Acts and this chapter of *The Story*—and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit marks a revolutionary change in God's historical plan of redemption. The Holy Spirit was both a physical sign (sounding like a

wind, looking like a fire), but also a high octane fuel that was so strong that Peter himself, freshly forgiven and still smelling of fish, stood up and gave perhaps the second greatest sermon on record. This was an unmistakable sign that Jesus' pledge had come true, and the promised Helper had arrived.

There is perhaps no theological subject that is the focus of more debate than the existence, role and power of the Holy Spirit. Across the religious world, there is a full spectrum of belief on what the Spirit is and does.

- Jehovah's Witnesses state in their *Watchtower* publication, "...God's holy spirit is not a God, not a member of a trinity, not coequal, and is not even a person...It is God's active force..."
- A fundamentalist church preacher was recently asked about the Holy Spirit's role today, and he said the only place we find the Holy Spirit today is in the pages of the Bible.
- On the other end of the spectrum, in some charismatic circles, the focus has rested on the showiness of the charismatic gifts, with **some** teaching that the **absence** of splashy gifts is a sign of spiritual immaturity.

Let's take a moment and look at what the Bible has to say about who the Spirit is and what He does. He is:

- The One through whom we draw near to Jesus—our relationship with God is through the Holy Spirit.
- He participated in creation (Genesis 1:2). He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). He is the one who reveals the word of God and inspires the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- He is distinct from the Father and Son: *However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.* (Rom. 8:9)
- The Spirit knows the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-14)
- The Holy Spirit indwells the community of the Church in a special way. *Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?* (1 Corinthians 3:16).

It's really important that we have biblical perspective of the Spirit's work in our lives. When Peter promises "the gift of the Holy Spirit" to those who believe, he is talking about a supernatural delivery at the moment of receiving Christ. Paul says in Ephesians:

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.

Ephesians 1:13-14

That means all believers.

And even though our terms have gotten a little mixed up because some people say "indwelling" of the Spirit, and others say, "baptism" of the Spirit, biblically, it's all the same thing.

Let's explore this...

Much of 1 Corinthians 12-14 was written to correct the church at Corinth because they had taken their eye off the ball when it came to the Holy Spirit's residence in every believer. They got more concerned about outdoing one another than about preserving unity in the Body. The spiritual gifts that come from the Holy Spirit are not meant for personal aggrandizement, but for the equipping of the saints for service. Listen to Paul:

A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church. To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another he gives the gift of special knowledge. The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else he gives the power to heal the sick. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and to another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another spirit that is speaking. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, and another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

1 Corinthians 12:7-11

Now listen to verse 13:

Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said about Jesus?

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Matthew 3:11

The important thing to remember is this: we have all been baptized, or indwelt, with the Holy Spirit when we believed in Christ and accepted Him as our Savior. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Be baptized in the Spirit! Be indwelt by the Spirit! Be gifted by the Spirit!" Why? Because it's God's work, and because, as Ephesians said, he gave all of us the promised Holy Spirit as a guarantee, or a seal, the moment we believed. We've all been baptized in the Spirit.

But as 1 Corinthians says, it looks different for everybody. "He alone decides which gift each person should have." A few people I've talked to at our church have a visionary gift for seeing angels present at key, holy, transforming moments. Do elders have an intercessory gift of healing? James calls them to anoint the sick and pray over them.

But occasionally, as we see in Acts, there was a special outpouring of the Spirit as a powerful witness to break new ground, as when Philip preached to the Samaritans, or Peter to Cornelius, or Barnabas to believers in Antioch. Each time special gifts, such as speaking in tongues, were given over and above the baptism of the Holy Spirit given to all believers.

Does that happen today? Can God still provide a miraculous, special filling of the Spirit in certain circumstances, to ratify His will? Certainly He can. Do people still have the gift of speaking in tongues? Contrary to some thought, speaking in tongues is not an unintelligible language or ecstatic utterances that no one can decipher. In the Bible, speaking in tongues would be you or me speaking English but a guy over there hearing Russian or Japanese. In the first century, that gift was crucial to communicate the gospel to the entire world. But today, in a time where you can click on a webpage and instantly translate it from English to Portuguese, it's not as needed. Could God give a miraculous gift of tongues to a missionary who was going to a foreign land? He could... but I know our Wycliffe missionaries spent years learning Quiche and Yalunka before they began to speak it and translate the Bible into those languages.

Paul said in Corinth, the various gifts of the Spirit were distracting from the overall purpose. Flashiness is not the point—serving the body to build up unity, with whatever gift you have, is the point.

So the question is, having been baptized by the Spirit with your body now its temple, how are you engaging the gifts He's given you? What are those gifts? It doesn't matter if they're visible or behind-the-scenes—the question is, how are you serving the body of Christ with them, and what are you doing to promote unity?

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is mentioned more than 50 times, as He becomes the catalyst for the creation and spread of the Church. He sends missionaries, appoints elders, opens eyes, sounds like a mighty wind, looks like a fire, fills new believers, heals the sick, and opens jail doors and chains.

But there is one gift we all equally receive from the Spirit that is on full display in the book of Acts: the Spirit as *paraclete*. This is the Greek word first mentioned by John, meaning “one who comes along side.”

In John 14, Jesus described a “Helper” or an “Advocate” that would come after He left. The Greek word *paraclete* is used for both Christ and the Holy Spirit:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another [Helper/ Counselor/ Advocate/ Friend/ Comforter] to be with you forever.

John 14:16

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an [Advocate/Helper/Priest-Friend/one who speaks for us] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

1 John 2:1

- **He stands along side, as to plead a defendant's case in a court of law.** When Stephen was dying, he looked up and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.
- **He helps us in our weaknesses to pray.**

I don't know about you, but my prayer life is one place where I need the most help. I get frustrated because what I've prayed for doesn't happen. I get frustrated because maybe it's because I've prayed for MY will to be done and not HIS. I get

frustrated because I want to pray for big things, like the eradication of all child abuse and sexual predators from the world, but I don't know how. I get frustrated because I pray for deliverance from my sins and they keep creeping back. This is why Romans 8 is so important:

The Spirit helps us with our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we should. But the Spirit himself speaks to God for us, even begs God for us with deep feelings that words cannot explain. God can see what is in people's hearts. And he knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit speaks to God for his people in the way God wants.

Romans 8:26-27

- **The *paraclete* is our Helper and Advocate before the world.**

But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you at that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speaks, but the Holy Spirit.

Mark 13:11

That was certainly true of Peter and John as they repeatedly got into trouble for preaching the name of Jesus.

- **He is a source of comfort.** He is our Comforter. We take comfort knowing He is called along side us through whatever trial we may face. The Holy Spirit provides tender mercy for God's people in their times of grief and pain, just as He comforted Peter and John and Paul in prison.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

Romans 8:35, 37

The Lord will keep all his promises; he is loyal to all he has made. The Lord helps those who have been defeated and takes care of those who are in trouble.

Psalms 145:13-14

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:17-18

- **The *paraclete* is the one who gives strength in times of battle.** Paul, Peter and John could preach without fear because their Helper was always beside them.

In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Romans 8:37

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 3:16

I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him.

Ephesians 1:19

In other words, a *paraclete* “has your six.”

And there’s your Equipping Point or Equipping Challenge for this week:

With whom do you need to “come along side?”

If we are the literal body of Christ in the world today, are we not doing some of the work of the Spirit of Christ by our willingness to walk alongside someone? It doesn’t mean we have all the answers, or even understand all the questions. But could we, as we lead our families and marketplaces, be willing just to walk along side, pray along side someone in a tough time? Might we be a “comforter” to a sleep-deprived wife caring for sick kids? A helper to a son or daughter who gets ribbed at school? An advocate for a co-worker who offers to pray for their situation?

This week, let’s take the lead by serving, by helping, by comforting.

But the Scripture that strikes me the most is Jesus’ announcement at the Feast of Tabernacles:

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

John 7:37-39

Rick Yaris from our church knows the value of a stream of living water. In Iraq four years ago, he was a victim of an IED explosion, with burns over 70% of his body. He remembered his training, and kept rolling on the ground to try and smother the flames, but he couldn’t—the burning just wouldn’t stop. Exhausted, he lay on his back, and told God that he was ready to go, if this was his time. But then he turned his head to the right and saw that he was right next to a flowing canal.

His flames were extinguished, and through 30 surgeries on his arms and face, and the loss of both legs, he ministered first in Iraq, then Germany, then BAMC. The Spirit saved Rick’s life literally in a stream of living water. Just like these characters in Acts, Rick has been through a huge transition in his life; and like Jesus, his scars are still plain to see.

And today, like Rick, and Peter and John, and Stephen, and Paul, there is nothing that is beyond the power of the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead to gift us, to comfort us, guide and advocate for us. This is the gift that Christ came to bring: once-for-all justification, and a Helper, Comforter and River to convict and cleanse, to counsel, and to build His home within us.

[Prayer]

Lord Jesus, we come in the power and majesty of Your Name, the Name above all names, the Name that cast out demons, raised the fallen, and immerses us into a likeness of death. Thank You that Your name Immanuel means You are with us; that as Jesus, You are Savior; that as Yeshua, You are our Messiah, our Anointed One.

And today we especially thank You for the individual gift of your Spirit, who convicts us, counsels and advocates for us. Fall fresh on us even now...work a mighty power through us today above all we could ask or imagine. Remove any artificial boundaries our feeble minds have placed on Your work, and astonish us today with what You can do with a believing heart. Even as you breathed on Your disciples, Lord Jesus, breathe the Spirit on us that we would be filled, empowered and loosed by that same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

In the matchless, glorious, conquering name of Jesus we pray...

Chapter 29: Maturing the Vision

Paul's Key Issues

1. _____

I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ....You are still not ready. You are still worldly.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Do not be entangled again by a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:26

For in fact the body is not one member but many...Members should have the same care for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:14, 25

By this time some of you ought to be teachers, but you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food... But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12, 14

2. _____

I appeal to you...that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be united in mind and thought...One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another says 'I follow Apollos' another 'I follow Peter' still another, 'I follow Christ.'

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

3. _____

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Acts 17:23

You are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

Romans 2:19-20

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.

Romans 12:2

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...

2 Corinthians 10:5

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

2 Timothy 2:23

4. _____

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

VS.

hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, and the feeling that everyone is wrong except you...

Galatians 5:20

5. _____

If Jesus was not resurrected then we are all still dead in our sins and our faith is worthless.

1 Corinthians 15:17

6. _____

You should know that your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit who is in you. You have received the Holy Spirit from God. So you do not belong to yourselves, because you were bought by God for a price. So honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

This Week's Equipping Point

What letter would Paul write to you?

You are a letter from Christ prepared by us. It is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on stone, but on human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:3

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the church need to grow up?
2. Can we say there is *anything* more important than church unity?
3. If Paul wrote you a letter today, where would he start?

Teaching Script

The year was 1788. The Constitution had just been ratified, and this radical new idea of a democratic, representative government called the United States of America was forming. But some clarity was needed.

On one hand you had the Federalists, who maintained that because of national security and international credibility, this new government needed a strong federal arm, that would have as much or more power than the states had individually. The Anti-Federalists, on the other hand, argued that putting too much power in the hands of the federal government rather than the states would be tantamount to making the President another King, which was precisely the problem they were trying to address.

So, the conundrum: how to keep the federal government from becoming too powerful, while giving the states the autonomy they needed, and protecting the rights of individual citizens from an overly aggressive commonwealth.

The answer was the Bill of Rights, or the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which provided for enough checks and balances to satisfy the Anti-Federalists. Now individual rights such as freedom of religion, due process, unreasonable search and seizure, trial by jury, excessive punishment, and the right to bear arms were in place.

What happened? The vision of this new venture of democratic government needed maturing. It needed to be fleshed out in practical terms so people understood how to apply its new principles in everyday life.

Chapter 29 does precisely that. This chapter in *The Story* is by far the longest chapter, but it matures the vision as Paul lays out the practical elements of the Christian life in his letters to the embryonic, emerging churches of the first century. Jesus had brought a radical, unexpected vision that challenged people to think in terms of spiritual transformation rather than political upheaval. The key principles of His teachings were still there:

- Love God and your neighbors as yourself.
- Lose your life in order to find it.
- Become a servant.

But how did Christianity work if the person who I'm commanded to love has just divorced me or taken me to court? How do you bring Jews and Gentiles into one Kingdom, when each has a totally different frame of reference? Since Jesus was a Jew, do you have to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian? And what do we do now with the Law? Just toss it after all these years? What happens when people start taking this new religion and, as humans are prone to do, use it for their own ends?

It's not an exact parallel, of course, but this chapter in the Story, in a way, serves as a set of instructions and clarifications to the gospel much like the amendments to the Constitution elucidate and illuminate the principles on which we were founded.

This was especially important because as we see in Acts, God's plan was not to keep the church in a cloistered biosphere, a pristine environment where it could be kept safe from the influences of the world. Quite the opposite: the church was supposed to go change the

world by engaging with it, influencing it, and making disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and teaching.

What we're looking for today are themes that are interwoven throughout the writings of Paul as he visits, addresses, equips, reprimands, and encourages these new believers.

Jewish converts already understood sin, God, and the long history of His work in their lives. But Gentile converts began at square one. So Paul adapted his methods of teaching, depending on his audience. His letters to each church reveal a wide array of problems; but while he addressed each church differently, there are some common threads that run throughout his letters—issues that do not surprise us, knowing the nature of the new organism that was being created.

Paul's Key Issues

1. Immaturity

When a new organization forms, what's the first thing people do? Create an org chart! Who's in charge? Will we do it your way or my way?

It wasn't hard to see the immaturity of the early church. In Corinth, people would brag on their spiritual pedigree: Peter taught me! Well, Paul baptized me! Later in the book, instead of serving the body of Christ with the gifts they had, they started comparing again: my gift is flashier than yours! People spoke in tongues but without an interpreter—which is roughly like trying to impress a blind person by the kind of car you drive. In Galatia, their immaturity was their inability to let go of the Law to embrace the love of Christ. In Rome, the Jews needed to get off their high horse, considering themselves the last bastion of truth.

And so one of Paul's central messages to the early churches was: Grow up!

I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ... You are still not ready. You are still worldly.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Their immaturity was manifesting itself in diverse ways.

Do not be entangled again by a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:26

For in fact the body is not one member but many... Members should have the same care for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:14, 25

A healthy church will always have believers at every level of maturity on the spectrum. A healthy church will have new converts who are mentored by wiser ones, the more mature serving as the church's rudder. The problem occurs when those who have been believers for awhile continue to subsist on "milk" instead of "meat."

The writer of Hebrews said,

By this time some of you ought to be teachers, but you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food... But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12, 14

A couple we know way back from Oklahoma City had a third child when they only planned two. Knowing this was her final child, the mother breast-fed this little boy until he was 3 ½.

The first message was *Grow up!* Setting aside your personal agendas for the good of the body is part of growing up. This leads to the second key problem the early churches faced:

2. Unity

When people are immature and demand their own way, when an eye for an eye is OK because feelings are hurt, unity suffers. Instead of maturing in the faith under the discipleship of the great church leaders that came to Corinth, they splintered into groups **around** the different leaders. Paul said,

I appeal to you...that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be united in mind and thought... One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another says 'I follow Apollos' another 'I follow Peter' still another, 'I follow Christ.'

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

Christian maturity produces unity in the Church. The thing Jesus prayed for the most before he was betrayed and taken into custody was for unity of the body, both then, as He gave His life, and later, as His church was formed. *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples..."* If you use the same language? If you vote the same? If you preach from the same version? If you condemn the same people? No... *"If you love one another."*

Paul said throughout his letters that what will distinguish us from all other self-centered, earthly organizations is if we treat each other differently. How? By not taking them to court, by loving them enough to speak the truth, by forgiving instead of backbiting, by accepting them as believers in Jesus even if they don't look like you, or have your background.

NOTE: Unity is not uniformity. Everyone doesn't have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. Today the corollary might be you don't have to become a Republican before you become a Christian. Unity is not uniformity—but it is sameness of purpose. And for that, Jesus says, he who is not against us is for us. Mature believers will choose unity over winning.

3. Worldview

The Corinthian world was a stronghold of worldly philosophy, cultural immorality, and pagan idolatry. With Athens only 45 miles away, the Greeks prided themselves on their

philosophical debates and their refined knowledge. The Corinthians wanted to embrace the philosophical wisdom of her Athenian neighbors. In fact, it was in Athens was where Paul found the altar with the inscription, *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*.

Greek mythology believed in supernatural powers that intervened in the course of nature, an existence beyond their ability to understand. But Paul wanted them to see that once you've explored everything that all the best Greek minds know there are still questions only Jesus can answer. *[Read together at the middle of p. 421-422.]* It was as if it was now fashionable to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, since everybody was talking about Him. But what they were doing was playing with fire—they were attempting to leverage the power of God for their own use, without the required transformation that must accompany belief in Christ.

Today the post-modern crowd says hey, we embrace all forms of thought...Oprah says there are many avenues to "God", however you define him. Some say, in fact, isn't "God" the sum total of what Rick thinks, and what Bill, Todd, and Steve all think, rolled into one?

Come to think of it, can we really say any one philosophy is better than any other? Let's sit around and compare. This applies not just to the Gentiles, who loved sitting in Starbucks sipping their lattes and debating existentialism. It also applied to the Jews, whose worldview centered on themselves. After all, WE are God's children...

Paul addressed them in Romans:

You are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

Romans 2:19-20

The Jews, smug in their knowledge of the Law, were appalled that the Gentiles were invited to the party without a decoder ring, without being circumcised, without any credentials that were so important to the Jewish hierarchy.

So repeatedly, Paul had to bring them back to the essentials, which had nothing to do with Jewish accreditation.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Why do many Christian homes look the same as non-Christian homes? Because we haven't focused on the fundamentals. Because we do not trust the sovereignty of God when things turn bad. Because we do not see the Upper Story; because we do not see what happens to us through God-tinted glasses. Because we allow the world to shape *us* rather than *us* shaping the world.

The Jews thought they had all the answers already. The Gentiles liked to argue for arguments' sake. But Paul took them both to task:

Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.

Romans 12:2

In other words, a Christian worldview doesn't require all the answers—it is anchored in one unchangeable, bedrock truth: There are questions and problems in life that only Jesus Christ can answer. And so Paul takes a 2x4 to the pretentiousness of both the Jews and Gentiles and says:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God...

2 Corinthians 10:5

Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

2 Timothy 2:23

Our worldview has to be rooted in a mysterious, unfathomable God who we trust as sovereign and in control. Both the philosophical debates of the Gentiles and the prized religious heritage of the Jews are meaningless when it comes to the problem of sin and the need for a Savior. Paul confronts these pretensions head-on.

4. Daily living

New believers had many questions about living out their faith in the real world. They still had to learn to navigate through decisions in daily life in a culture hostile to holy living. Believers were filing lawsuits against one another instead of settling matters privately and justly among themselves. They needed guidance in marriage, divorce, and living singly. They didn't know how to handle dietary problems that were associated with the idolatry around them. Christians were disruptive during worship and made the Lord's Supper an affair of gluttony. They had trouble discerning whether it was the Spirit speaking to them or a worldly or demonic influence. They established and then overthrew a holy "pecking order" to separate the "strong" from the "weak."

When it comes to living out your new life every day, Paul told them:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Galatians 5:22-23

It's really pretty simple. Does the direction you're headed lead to things like peace and goodness between you? Then you're on the right track—that's how you start to make good decisions. Play the tape all the way to the end and think about the outcome. But if your direction will lead to...

...hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, and the feeling that everyone is wrong except you...

Galatians 5:20 NLT

...then you need to reconsider. Romans 14 says shouldn't you consider a more vulnerable brother before you exercise your "liberties?" Sure it may be OK for you to drink a glass of wine, but do you really want to insist on your own way in front of an alcoholic who's been sober for the last five years? Ephesians 5 says to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Do you really want to pull rank on your wife in light of the command to give yourself up for her?

What does holy living look like today? Think less about *your* rights and think more about others and how to serve them.

5. Doctrine

Paul was aghast that some among them had apparently dismissed a crucial aspect of the gospel and its implications on the Christian life. They were denying the resurrection! Paul gave them a written remedial lesson in the essentials of the gospel, including the non-negotiable point that Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Based on Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Paul argued that all believers can look forward in hopeful expectation of our own future redemption of our bodies. Just as Christ was resurrected to live forever, so too will all Christians look forward to eternal life in a resurrected body. Paul reminded them that this teaching was THE basis of the Christian faith. If we all will not be resurrected, then Jesus Himself must not have been resurrected because He too is fully man. If Jesus was not resurrected then we are all still dead in our sins and our faith is worthless (1 Corinthians 15:13-17).

But there are also some non-essentials that are important to people. Do we make our opinions doctrine, or do we dismiss them, or do we love others well by respecting where they come from? Paul asked the Christians in Rome, Do you really want to make a federal case out of whether someone is a vegetarian or not? Whether they observe a day as sacred or not? Today we might ask the same about instrumental music or frequency of communion. Do you really want to draw those lines of fellowship, of doctrine, where the Word of God has not? Did not Christ die to set us free?

Requiring new believers to jump through Jewish hoops before they could be considered valid Christians was also a doctrinal issue. Paul asked the Galatians in chapter 3, would you start a work by the Holy Spirit and then finish it by human effort? Of course not!

Christian maturity produces unity in essential doctrines and liberty in the non-essentials. The mature Christian also knows the difference. The essentials according to Paul were:

- the purity of the gospel (death, burial and resurrection)
- salvation by grace through faith
- walking by the Holy Spirit
- Jesus as fully God and fully man, who paid the price of sin through His death and resurrection
- the truth and reliability of the Scriptures

What for you is a non-negotiable and what is a non-essential that we can allow for in Christian love and freedom?

6. Sexual Immorality

What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth! Just do it! You only live once! Our culture is marked by indulgence, immorality, and self-gratification. But as the wise Solomon once wrote, “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (Ecclesiastes 1:9c). The parallels between ancient Corinth and contemporary America are uncanny.

Because of her strategic port location, the immorality of Corinth was legendary. The economy was kept afloat with trade, sailors and the prostitution, gambling and other vices that accompanied the unsavory crowds that frequented this major metropolis. The temple of Aphrodite was known for its temple prostitutes and the term “corinthianize” was coined to describe sexual immorality. It’s here that immorality, the doctrine of grace, immaturity, and unity collide.

In one case, a man was sleeping with his own stepmother—a sin that even the Gentiles in the community repudiated. The Bible says the Corinthians were arrogant or proud—it could be they were proud because they had shown so much grace that they had forgotten the need to remove evil from their midst. But Paul corrects their doctrine, their concept of grace, their immaturity, and the need for unity and holiness in the body of Christ when he tells them to grow up and deal with this.

The Christian life is marked by morality. Like the Corinthian Church, converts into our church are coming out of a culture saturated in sex. Our morals cannot be shaped by the latest Victoria’s Secret ad. Paul had to write over and over again to the new churches that the purchase of Christ was so extravagant, it calls us to an uncommon devotion that requires walking away from the world, from gossip, slander, bitterness, and sexual activity outside of marriage.

How do you nurture along new believers in this radical new way of life? Where do you draw lines and where do you allow for liberties and matters of opinion? What’s okay and what’s not? What will *you* need to die to, in order to preserve the unity of the body of Christ?

These letters of Paul show us there are a million and one ways to live out your faith and the same number of ways to fool yourself. How do you keep your doctrine pure? Walk according to the Spirit? Preserve unity? Keep the right perspective in a confusing, sinful world? The letters to Galatia, Rome, Thessalonica, Colossae, and the rest tutor us to keep faithful.

The only question left to ask is this: what letter would he write to our church? Or perhaps more importantly, **what letter would Paul write to you?** Where would he encourage you to keep it up and where would he admonish and correct you?

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to [insert my name and city]. Greetings in the Lord. I know of your _____. Above all, let yourself _____.

Paul, to the church of God who meets at Bill’s house...I plead with you, brother, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to _____.

Paul, an apostle, to Ken and all the saints that meet with you: We do not want you to be ignorant of _____, but in all earnestness, pursue _____.

Our **Equipping Point** for this week is actually homework. In the next couple of days, write a letter to yourself, but not just any letter.

Set it up right by doing the following:

1. *Confess sins that you're aware of*
2. *Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what a Paul might write to you personally*
3. *Pray for courage to hear this message without defensiveness*
4. *Sit down and write a letter to yourself*

This is a letter no one else will see, one that you can keep or shred. But to lead well, there is great value, at least once, to ask for transparency and guidance, and then write down what comes to mind. Who knows what God may be waiting to say to you?

Let's let Paul have the last word:

You are a letter from Christ prepared by us. It is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on stone, but on human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:3

Chapter 30: The Final Equipping of the Man of God

1. The _____ of the man of God.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So you must never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. It is God who saved us and chose us to live a holy life. He did this not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan long before the world began—to show his love and kindness to us through Christ Jesus. And now he has made all of this plain to us by the coming of Christ Jesus, our Savior, who broke the power of death and showed us the way to everlasting life through the Good News. And that is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return. Hold on to the pattern of right teaching you learned from me. And remember to live in the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. With the help of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard what has been entrusted to you. 2 Timothy 1:8-15

For God has reserved a priceless inheritance for his children. It is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him.

1 Peter 1:4-5

2. The _____ of the man of God.

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:3-4)

Share in the troubles we have like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. A soldier wants to please the enlisting officer, so no one serving in the army wastes time with everyday matters.

Paul considered believers to be at war with three things: the _____, our own _____, and _____.

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:5)

Also an athlete who takes part in a contest must obey all the rules in order to win.

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:6-7)

Hardworking farmers are the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Think about what I am saying. The Lord will give you understanding in all these things.

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:15-16)

Make every effort to give yourself to God as the kind of person he will accept. Be a worker who is not ashamed and who uses the true teaching in the right way. Stay away from foolish, useless talk, because that will lead people further away from God.

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:20-23)

In a large house there are not only things made of gold and silver, but also things made of wood and clay. Some things are used for special purposes, and others are made for ordinary jobs. All who make themselves clean from evil will be used for special purposes. They will be made holy, useful to the Master, ready to do any good work. We do not preach about ourselves, but we preach that Jesus Christ is Lord... We have this treasure from God, but we are like clay jars that hold the treasure. This shows that the great power is from God, not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:5, 7

- _____ (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

The Lord's servants must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone. They must be able to teach effectively and be patient with difficult people. They should gently teach those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will believe the truth.

3. Beware the _____ of the man of God.

In the last days there will be many troubles, because people will love themselves, love money, brag, and be proud. They will say evil things against others and will not obey their parents or be thankful or be the kind of people God wants. They will not love others, will refuse to forgive, will gossip, and will not control themselves. They will be cruel, will hate what is good, will turn against their friends, and will do foolish things without thinking. They will be conceited, will love pleasure instead of God, and will act as if they serve God but will not have his power. Stay away from those people. But you have followed what I teach, the way I live, my goal, faith, patience, and love. You know I never give up. You should continue following the teachings you learned. You know they are true, because you trust those who taught you. Since you were a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise.

2 Timothy 3:1-5, 14-15

How will you live in such a confusing world? You can rely on two things:

You can trust _____; and you can trust the _____.

This Week's Equipping Point:

"Am I doing anything now that would decrease your trust in me?"

"Is there anything I need to repent of that would increase your trust in me?"

4. The _____ of the man of God.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Discussion Questions

1. Why do people tend to focus on *their* performance, rather than God's power, to keep safe their reward?
2. Which of the presentations of the man of God are most challenging to you?
3. Write your one-sentence epitaph.

Teaching Script

[Show the Epitaph PowerPoint]

The last epitaph, of course, was the Apostle Paul's.

He was in a Roman prison, and had one more letter to write to his spiritual son, Timothy. His previous imprisonment in Rome was a minimum-security, house arrest kind of affair where Paul received visitors daily. This last incarceration, under the insane Nero, offered no hope of escape, much less privileges. The persecution of Christians had escalated significantly, and Paul had not been spared the effects.

Paul had been on three missionary journeys, four if you count his last trip, and had been through shipwreck, beatings, torture, everything. Now, the end was undeniably near, and his every word mattered. Nothing could be wasted, because there wouldn't be another letter after this one. Speak now or it will never be said. In Paul's final days and hours, what cream rises to the top? Of all that could be said, which words would he choose? Which words would you choose?

As men, there are few places in the Bible that warrant our attention more than the book of 2 Timothy. Just as you and I, in a foreign prison, or lying terminally ill, would weigh our last words carefully, so Paul's encouragement and instructions to Timothy are priceless jewels for the man of God. Given the weight on this last letter, we would do well to listen carefully.

Paul addresses four perspectives of the man of God.

1. **The perseverance of the man of God.** Listen from 2 Timothy Chapter 1:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. ⁸So you must never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. It is God who saved us and chose us to live a holy life. He did this not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan long before the world began—to show his love and kindness to us through Christ Jesus. ¹⁰And now he has made all of this plain to us by the coming of Christ Jesus, our Savior, who broke the power of death and showed us the way to everlasting life through the Good News. ¹²And that is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return.

¹³Hold on to the pattern of right teaching you learned from me. And remember to live in the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴With the help of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard what has been entrusted to you.

“A holy calling”—a sacred trust that HE will keep, guarded by Holy Spirit—that was not because of anything we did ourselves but because of God's purpose and grace.

Before Adam and Eve, his holy calling was on Bill to run Sysco, on Larry to run Harte-Hanks, for Bruce to walk through a time of unemployment to increase his trust in God, for Rodney to come out of retirement, purchase a few ties, and invest his life in teenagers at Geneva school. Whatever your place right now, in whatever condition, with or without

a job, with or without a clue where you'll be three months from now, your situation this morning is part of a plan he formed millennia ago for each of the billions of believers throughout time.

That is a God worthy of our worship.

Paul says, Timothy, the first thing you need to know is that the suffering I've been through as a follower of Christ is probably in store for you as well, but I am confident that

"He is able to keep what I've committed." God is able to keep the imperfect commitment I've made to Him until that last day. 1 Peter 1 says,

For God has reserved a priceless inheritance for his children. It is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him.

1 Peter 1:4-5

Your salvation is absolutely secure...not because of your power to keep all the laws, or obey perfectly, but because salvation is God's thing.

So he says in verse 14, "*Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*"

This is the echo of the promise from Ephesians where Paul said:

And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee (some versions say 'down payment') that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.

Ephesians 1:13-14

In other words, Timothy, don't worry about God keeping His end of the bargain. The phrase "I am persuaded that He is able" doesn't mean, "OK, God has pretty much talked me in to the idea that my trust is secure." This word "persuaded" is more accurately translated "I am convinced, because of what He's done in the past..." It is an assurance based on past faithfulness. In other words, "I've seen it time and time again and I know it to be true." Timothy, if there were ever anything you could hang your hat on, it's God's faithfulness and His ability to keep your soul safe until that great day of His return.

And if I had just a few paragraphs at the end of my life to communicate something to my kids, this would be one of those things: Sweetheart, no matter what happens in your life, no matter how far away you might feel from God, no matter how much doubt Satan has introduced into your heart, of this I am convinced: He is able! He is able to keep the faith that you've committed, weak though it may be, He has reserved your place at His side, kept pure and undefiled in heaven for you, to protect what you have committed until you receive His salvation on that last day. No matter what happens, you can take that to the bank, because your inheritance is not kept by something as fragile as your obedience; it's kept by the seal of the Holy Spirit, given to you on the day you believed. Count on it.

Then, in Chapter 2 of 2 Timothy Paul illustrates...

2. **The presentation of the man of God.**

Throughout this chapter, he mentions time and again this “holy calling,” and the roles it takes. For instance,

- **Soldier** (2 Timothy 2:3-4)
Share in the troubles we have like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. A soldier wants to please the enlisting officer, so no one serving in the army wastes time with everyday matters.

The metaphor of Christian life as warfare is mentioned in several of Paul's earlier letters. He considered believers to be at war with three things:

- 1) The evil world system, or fallen world we all inhabit
- 2) Our own sinful human nature
- 3) Satan and his demons and armies

A man of God first understands that war has been declared on the forces of evil, by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. That war has been won, but Satan will continue to battle, deceive, undermine, and thwart God's purposes until the last day when he will be thrown into the lake of fire forever. Until then, friendship with the world is enmity with God. And until we see this struggle as warfare: not a casual disagreement, not a power to be taken lightly or flirted with, but a matter of life and death where blood has been shed and will continue to be shed; until we see this as single-minded combat, we do not see it as Jesus sees it. Compromise, or dallying in enemy territory such as pornography or dishonesty is NOT an option.

- **Athlete** (2 Timothy 2:5)
Also an athlete who takes part in a contest must obey all the rules in order to win.

This is a picture of a spiritual race and untiring pursuit to achieve the prize, but only if you compete according to the rules. This is a call to obey the Word of God. As a second presentation of the man of God, using an athlete as a metaphor, he must compete on the playing field that God has outlined. Whether an athlete or a soldier, God gives the gifts, God equips His men, and God outlines the battles and races in which he has called us to compete.

- **Farmer** (2 Timothy 2:6-7)
Hardworking farmers are the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Think about what I am saying. The Lord will give you understanding in all these things.

The Greek verb “hardworking” means “to labor to the point of exhaustion.” Ancient farmers put in long hours of backbreaking labor, under all kinds of conditions, hoping that their effort would produce a bountiful harvest. Paul is urging Timothy to “labor intensely,” just as he wrote the Colossians:

We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I **labor**, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me (Colossians 1:28-29).

- **Worker** (2 Timothy 2:15-16)

Make every effort to give yourself to God as the kind of person he will accept. Be a worker who is not ashamed and who uses the true teaching in the right way. Stay away from foolish, useless talk, because that will lead people further away from God.

Do you see how Paul is making the same point again and again, each time from a different angle? For a man of God, for every person here, if you're a soldier, don't waste time with everyday matters—focus on your battlefield. If you're an athlete, train according to the rules. If you're a farmer, labor intensely, striving according to His power, to bring in a spiritual harvest. If you're a worker, which is just about anybody, work so you are not ashamed, who rightly divides the Word, doing away with foolish talk, gossip, and slander. In other words, whatever hat you're wearing, Timothy, your objective is the same: give it all you've got, and stick to God's rules—compromise, laziness and surrender are not in our vocabulary!

- **Vessel** (2 Timothy 2:20-23)

In a large house there are not only things made of gold and silver, but also things made of wood and clay. Some things are used for special purposes, and others are made for ordinary jobs. All who make themselves clean from evil will be used for special purposes. They will be made holy, useful to the Master, ready to do any good work.

God not only equips you for battle, for the race you will run, the crops you will work, but also the **vessel** you'll be. The point is, it's not about your *composition*: made of gold or made of clay; silver or wood. "All who make themselves clean"—another version says, "If you keep yourselves pure," you will be used for special purposes.

Paul was probably remembering what he'd told the Corinthians:

We do not preach about ourselves, but we preach that Jesus Christ is Lord... We have this treasure from God, but we are like clay jars that hold the treasure. This shows that the great power is from God, not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:5,7

And last, the role of a

- **Servant** (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

The Lord's servants must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone. They must be able to teach effectively and be patient with difficult people. They should gently teach those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will believe the truth.

Serving people means kindness and patience. If you don't want your witness to be compromised, as a pastor or a farmer or a worker, speak gently to those who oppose the truth.

In chapter two, Paul says that the man of God has a pattern—a *modus operandi* that no matter what he's doing, keeps him focused on the battlefield where God places him, running the race where God enters him, working the field where God plants him, using God's Word faithfully and not to your own ends, speaking graciously, whether God made you a golden urn or a plastic trash can. It's all about purity: an athlete who obeys the rules, a worker who rightly divides the Word of truth, vessels who make themselves clean, servants who speak the truth.

Paul's third perspective from is from the 3rd chapter:

3. Beware the *perils* of the man of God. In 2 Timothy 3:

In the last days there will be many troubles, because people will love themselves, love money, brag, and be proud. They will say evil things against others and will not obey their parents or be thankful or be the kind of people God wants. They will not love others, will refuse to forgive, will gossip, and will not control themselves. They will be cruel, will hate what is good, will turn against their friends, and will do foolish things without thinking. They will be conceited, will love pleasure instead of God, and will act as if they serve God but will not have his power. Stay away from those people.

But you have followed what I teach, the way I live, my goal, faith, patience, and love. You know I never give up. You should continue following the teachings you learned. You know they are true, because you trust those who taught you. Since you were a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise.

2 Timothy 3:1-5, 14-15

You need to know, Timothy, that as a soldier you will encounter increasing opposition. They won't be servants who speak kindly, or diligent farmers, or disciplined like athletes. They will be "horizontally challenged," speaking evil against others, refusing to forgive and turning against their friends. And they'll also be "vertically challenged," acting as if they serve God but they will not have his power. Timothy, run, don't walk, to the nearest exit.

How will you live in such a confusing world, with this kind of behavior all around you? You can rely on two things:

- 1) **You can trust *me*.** You've seen what I teach, the way I live, the fact that I don't give up. Because of this consistency in me, because of my integrity, you can trust those who taught you. You can trust me.
- 2) **You can trust the *Word of God*.** Since you were small, you've known the Bible, and it, more than anything else, will make you wise.

Gentlemen, at the end of my life, if I have the opportunity to write one last letter to my girls, I want more than anything to have lived the kind of life that would

permit me to say, “You can trust me. You’ve seen how I lived my life, how my actions measured up to my words...how I tried to live with integrity by honoring God, honoring your mother, honoring others, even when no one was looking... Girls, you can trust the one who taught you.”

Your Equipping Point (or Equipping Task for this week) is to approach the person closest to you (in most cases your wife, but if you’re single, a trusted friend) and have the courage to ask them these two questions:

- **“Am I doing anything now that would decrease your trust in me?”**
- **“Is there anything in the past I need to repent of that would increase your trust in me?”**

What can you do this week to move you closer to the point where you *can* say, in good conscience, at the end of your life, “Remember what I’ve said—you can trust me.”

With all the perils that face us today, do we not all wish to speak the same words to our children, as Paul did to his son in the faith, Timothy?

And last... In this living testament Paul has urged Timothy to persevere as a man of God, to present himself as a man of God, to be very aware of perils as a man of God, and now, at the end, with these first three in place, he can have...

4. **The peace of the man of God.**

We’ve already read Paul’s epitaph once; let’s read it again:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...

2 Timothy 4:6-8

In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the drink offering was the final step that followed the burnt offerings and grain offerings. His death would be the final offering in a life full of sacrifices to God. In fact, the word he uses for “my departure” is the word for loosening something, like the mooring ropes of a ship. It’s time to undock, he says, to be at home with the Lord—which is what Paul really wanted anyway.

The past tense verbs “have fought,” “have finished,” and “have kept” indicate completed actions, but with continuing results—sort of like ripples that fan out forever. Dare you and I hope that as we embrace our families for the last time, our influence, by the grace of God, might be felt by our grandchildren, and their children, and their children...

Here is the message of 2 Timothy. Son, if you can say that you know whom you’ve believed, and are convinced that He is able; if you, as a soldier, farmer, athlete, and vessel of the Lord will be filled and used by His Spirit; if you can recognize the perils of

the enemy and will trust me and the Scriptures...then the peace of God will be yours. You'll be ready to pass on to your children, to your church, a completed faith with continuing results, with ripples that extend farther out than you could imagine, multiplied by the Holy Spirit, so that the crown with your name awaits you on that day.

As the second to last time you and I will study together, can I make Paul's final letter part of my benediction to you? We'll continue this next week, but for now, these are our Equipping Points for today:

- As a man of God, every single one of you has been given a sacred trust—please do not take it lightly.
- Your priceless inheritance cannot perish, spoil, or fade, and is waiting for you.
- Live such that at the end, you can look your kids in the eye and say, “Of this I am convinced: He is able to keep what you have committed to Him.”
- You are a vessel that is priceless not because of you, whether you're made of gold or clay, but because of the treasure you contain: the Holy Spirit of God.
- Live your life so that in the end, you can also look at your children and grandchildren and say, “You can trust me. You've seen how I live my life. You can trust the one who taught you.”
- And last, live your life so that the battles you've fought, and the race you've run, will create ripples, influence, that will extend and multiply until Jesus returns for all of us.

[Prayer]

Lord Jesus, make us men of God, whose epitaphs speak not of ourselves, but of the One who saved us, who inspires us, and calls us into His marvelous light.

Chapter 31: The End of Time

Descriptions of Jesus from the Old and New Testaments:

- a tender shoot
- no beauty or majesty to attract us to him
- despised and rejected by men
- a man of sorrows
- oppressed and afflicted
- born in a barn
- son of peasants
- “Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”
- “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

“Revelation” means “_____” “_____” or
“_____.”

Descriptors of this same God-man now:

- The Alpha and the Omega
- The First and the Last
- The Beginning and the End
- The Almighty
- The Living One
- The Lion of the tribe of Judah
- The Root of David
- Faithful and True
- The Faithful Witness
- The Word of God
- The King of Kings and Lord of Lords
- The Bright and Morning Star

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Revelation 21:3-4

Today's Equipping Point

Pray for God to begin _____

Words of encouragement from Jesus' letters to the seven churches

Ephesus: Good things can never replace a _____ with Jesus.

Smyrna: Fear nothing of the _____.

Pergamum: _____ nothing.

Thyatira: Do not live a _____ life. You are called to be a "fully _____" for God.

Sardis: It's not about _____.

Philadelphia: You will be _____.

Laodicea: Jesus loves those He _____ and _____.
I am here, at the door, knocking; will you hear? Will you open the door?

Discussion Questions

1. What do you see of Jesus in Revelation that you haven't seen before?
2. Why is His role as Righteous Judge so important?
3. Which of His instructions to the seven churches most challenge you this morning?

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Colossians 1:28

Teaching Script

Wow, what a journey! For almost nine months, we have undertaken what seemed to be a very impractical goal when we began: the whole family, through the whole Bible in a year. But as usual, this group of men has been faithful beyond expectation, and God has grown so many of us through this study to see His Upper Story weave throughout the entire Bible, in new stories we've never heard, and in old stories seen with fresh eyes.

And from day one, in these astounding stories of everyday men and women, the name of "Jesus" has been whispered, and sometimes shouted from each chapter. For me, I have seen anew the intricate, mystical puzzle that God assembled before the beginning of time, and then gradually, piece by piece, revealed to us as the outline, then the silhouette, then the sketch, then the full picture of Jesus has been painted throughout Scripture.

It's been like watching a master artist compose a beautiful portrait, one step at a time. The OT gave us frequent glimpses, or portrait sketches, from several different angles. Then we watched the Word and Creator Himself as He walked the earth, showing us the detailed features of this God, how He taught, when He laughed and when He cried, and his demeanor as He sat a child on His lap, or as He cleaned out the temple. Then a disturbing element of color entered the painting, and of course the color was blood red. As more and more red was added, it was almost too much for us to look at as the full weight of sin, the full fury of God, was poured out on one man's fragile body—a body just like ours, that was taken to the absolute limit of torture prior to His death.

Then, three days later, the red in the portrait joined with yellow and orange and became the bright glow of Easter Sunday, the pure white of unstained linen, as once and for all He conquered darkness, and forever the blackness of sin was eradicated from the picture.

And now we stand at the final book of the Bible, Revelation. This is a chapter we dare not leave out, because only here do we begin to see a glimmer of Jesus as He really is, now at the right hand of the Father...Jesus as He really was before the foundation of the world...and Jesus as He will be as Righteous Judge, overwhelming Conqueror, Husband of the Bride, and Light of Eternity.

The New Testament begins with the four gospels that reveal the first coming of Christ. This book of Revelation reveals the second coming of Christ as the culmination of all the themes we've studied these last eight months: themes of relentless pursuit and unending forgiveness that now climax with the New Heaven and New Earth. The thrust of the message of Revelation is Jesus' ultimate victory over His enemies and the establishment of His kingdom. I know many Christians avoid the book of Revelation because of its symbolism, its apocalyptic genre; but to avoid this book is to neglect the final step. After the humiliation and suffering, after His death and resurrection, one stage remains: the glorification of Jesus—the final staggering chapter of the Story that paints Him in the full color of the majesty that is due only Him.

Christ is the main subject of the whole book; and without it, we would miss the end of the Upper Story and the final service of Jesus: to continue watch over His Church, to return for His own, to judge the world in a time of Tribulation such as the world has never seen; to reign, and finally to execute the justice we've all been waiting for: the final defeat,

judgment and expulsion of Satan and his angels to the eternal lake of fire. That's the Jesus I want to be next to, when all evil is banished, all death defeated, and final justice is pronounced on the one who is responsible for all the tears, pain, and suffering of the people I love. We dare not omit or minimize this final saga where Jesus makes his enemies a footstool for His feet, and His name is exalted far above every name.

What would you give to be John as the one to whom this was revealed? Of the original apostles, only John remained to hear these words. He had experienced the climax of salvation history on Resurrection Sunday, but God was not yet finished. He had one more message to share with John.

He was exiled on the island of Patmos for his faith in Jesus. He had a longer history with Jesus than any of the other apostles. Some scholars think he was a first cousin of Jesus, the son of Salome. John, along with his brother James, and Peter, became the most trusted of Jesus' disciples. He had an especially intimate relationship with these three men who would later play significant roles in the life of the early church. John was the "beloved disciple." He was there when Jesus healed Jairus' daughter. He witnessed firsthand the tiniest glimpse of Jesus' glorification at the Transfiguration. John and Peter were charged with preparing the Passover supper (Luke 22:8) where he later reclined against Jesus' breast. Hours later, he saw both the terror of what was to come in the Garden and the horror of Jesus' execution. It was to John that Jesus entrusted His mother, and gave John to her as a son. After the ascension of Christ, Galatians calls him a "pillar" as a leader in the young church. He outlived all the other apostles and is probably the only one of the original disciples who was not martyred for his faith.

Yes, John had a long history with Jesus. They were more than familiar, they were intimately close. But none of that prepared him for the vision that he saw on the island of Patmos many years later. The glimpse of Jesus' glory at the Transfiguration could not have prepared him for this.

[Read p. 460]

The contrast in his Master from 65 years earlier could not have been more stark. **The descriptions of Jesus, from the Old and New Testaments**, were hardly impressive:

- a tender shoot
- no beauty or majesty to attract us to him
- despised and rejected by men
- a man of sorrows
- oppressed and afflicted
- born in a barn
- son of peasants
- "Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"
- "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

But the word "**revelation**" in the Bible means "**uncovering**," "**unveiling**" or "**disclosure**." And what is disclosed and unveiled in the book of Revelation? The matchless, indescribable, hair-raising, heart-stopping, spine-tingling Lord Jesus Christ in all His glory.

Listen to the **descriptors of this same God-man now:**

- The Alpha and the Omega
- The First and the Last
- The Beginning and the End
- The Almighty
- The Living One
- The Lion of the tribe of Judah
- The Root of David
- Faithful and True
- The Faithful Witness
- The Word of God
- The King of Kings and Lord of Lords
- The Bright and Morning Star

John saw the throne room of heaven where he was shown visions of future events. God sat upon His throne in unimaginable splendor and beauty. He was surrounded by living creatures and elders who worshiped Him without ceasing. He held a scroll that no one was found worthy to open, until all eyes focused on the one in the midst of the lampstands: a Lamb standing, the scars from Its slaughter still visible as if slain. Here was the One worthy to open the scroll, which contained seals, trumpets and bowls of judgment upon a wicked earth.

Shortly thereafter, the bride who symbolizes all faithful believers was ready, wearing clean linen and prepared for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Then John saw heaven opened, and Jesus descending in full glory on a white horse, ready to wage war and finally eliminate evil for His bride, the Church. The King of Kings was ready to rule with blazing eyes and a blood drenched robe, a sharp sword extending from His mouth signifying that His Word was final and absolute. He was accompanied by the armies of heaven. This definitive Great White Throne judgment is the final event of human history as we know it. The dead stand before Him, and those not found in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire.

Then John saw the New Heaven and New Earth and the New Jerusalem. Are there any more majestic words in all of Scripture than these:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Revelation 21:3-4

I know we've all heard the jokes about heaven being an endless worship service, and who wants that? But I've gotta tell you, when I watch God finally wipe away the last tear from my wife's eyes, from my mom's eyes, and even the last tear from my dad's eyes, I can tell you right now, all I'm gonna want to do is worship.

And our **Equipping Point** for today, for this last chapter, is:

Pray for God to begin lifting your burdens now.

He will wipe away all tears then, but what could He release you from today that would embolden and empower you while you're still here? Men don't normally think in terms of someone wiping away our tears, so think of this verse as "baggage." Is there something you could unload with God's help? A memory or past failure from which you could be freed, so that, in essence, He begins now to wipe the tears from our eyes? Do we have the courage to pray for this? In order to lead our families well, in an act of surrender to God, I believe we must.

In this future re-creation, all the themes from His redemptive Story are consummated in this place where all things are made new. This majestic and glorious New Jerusalem will be home to all the redeemed. Nothing impure will ever enter it. The water of life flows from the throne of God, and the tree of life, first seen in the Garden of Eden, reappears to bear fruit, and all are invited to partake. It is here that the redeemed will enjoy the presence of God and of the Lamb forever, because as it says on page 468 of *The Story*, "...the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."

Maybe it was this Scripture that inspired this song...

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.

1 Corinthians 2:9

[play a recording of the worship song, "I Can Only Imagine"]

Chapters two and three of the book of Revelation contain seven messages to seven churches. And while we don't have time to read Chapters 2 and 3 in their entirety, I'd like to borrow the words of Jesus to these churches as my final encouragements to you. I tried to write some deep, touching benediction to leave you with, but the words failed me. As it turns out, I shouldn't have even tried, because we have here in Revelation Jesus' words to His churches. So as my final encouragement to you, allow me to adapt Jesus' words from the letters He wrote to these seven churches in Asia:

- From His words to the church in **Ephesus**: continue your hard work, good deeds and service, but remember these **good things cannot replace a relationship with Jesus**. It's possible to do great things, but never substitute doing the best thing, which is offering your heart to God. If your heart is both changed and humbled that God could use someone like you, your service to Jesus becomes a humble act of gratitude, rather than an item on your checklist.
- From His words to the church in **Smyrna**: **fear nothing of the *enemy***. There will be suffering for Christ's sake in this life—some of which you are enduring now. All this is temporal. But your eternal inheritance is being kept safe, where it will never perish, spoil, or fade. Remember Paul's epitaph: a crown awaits the faithful.

- From His words to the church in **Pergamum**: compromise nothing. Test everything you hear against the purity of Scripture. There will never be a shortage of idols; may you guard against the seduction of idols such as sexuality, greed, power, and busyness. The slope is slippery and you'll be sucked in before you know it. So, as the roll call sergeant from Hill St. Blues used to say, "Let's be careful out there."
- From His words to the church in **Thyatira**: remember God searches minds and hearts, and no matter what you do, or where you do it, nothing is hidden from Him. Above all, **do not live a compartmentalized life**. If you are "holy"—or "called out"—"set apart"—it is impossible to bless God and curse men from the same mouth. Your church life cannot be disembodied from your family life or your work life. **You are called to be a "fully integrated package" for God.**
- From His words to the church in **Sardis**: **it's not about appearances**. Some of you need to be watchful, strengthen your faith, and repent. And some of you have not defiled your garments—some of you have not stained your character. If you remain faithful, Jesus will forever be your Advocate, confessing your name before His Father and His angels.
- From His words to the church in **Philadelphia**: Some of you have been through the wringer already. Your strength has been sapped, but you have kept His word and not denied His name. **You will be conquerors**—because you have persevered. YOU will be exalted, and everyone will know Jesus has chosen you.
- From His words to the church in **Laodicea**: Just as the Hebrew writer said, **Jesus loves those He reproves and disciplines**. Don't let what the world gives fool you: your job may be secure, your 401k untouched, but in the end, we are all spiritually poor, blind, and naked. If we all don't start here: admitting we are wretched, miserable, and desperately in need of a Savior, then none of this will make sense. Don't be lukewarm, the pompous Emperor with no clothes. Wear Jesus or remain pathetically naked. He said, **I am here, at the door, knocking; will you hear? Will you open the door?**

For all of us, I pray that because of these last six years, the answer is, "Yes, Lord Jesus, come in. Come quickly."

[Prayer]

Father, my prayer for every one of these men is the same prayer Jesus offered for them: Protect them by the power of your name—so that they may be one. They are not of this world—please protect them from the evil one. Sanctify them by the truth of Your Word. As you sent Jesus into the world, send them into the world to change it forever by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I pray also for those who will believe in Jesus through their message, that each family, each church may be one, even as you, Lord Jesus, are one with Your Father, so that the world may believe that You have sent them. May we all be brought to complete unity to let the world know who we are, and Whose we are, and where we're going.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.