

# Guide to Bible Storytelling

Motto: **Love one another – Go and make disciples**

## Summary

How to teach just about anything in a powerfully effective way using story-telling.

## Why Use Storytelling?

- It is what Jesus did, and how nearly half the Bible is written.
- It is enjoyable and engaging.
- It can be done with and by non-readers.
- It doesn't require people to have bibles.
- Stories make people want to hear the next one.
- Stories can be shared with atheists and people who say they don't believe the bible.
- Stories have the power to challenge deeply without being confrontational.
- Stories are memorable and the Holy Spirit can keep working through the story for days, weeks and months after it was shared.
- Stories allow for participation through asking questions, identifying with the characters or by acting it out.
- Stories help create communities as people gather to listen, re-tell them and discuss them.
- People who listen to a set of bible stories rarely continue to have doubts about the truth of the bible.
- Stories are better at changing people's worldviews than logical arguments are.

50 non-reading church planters in India were trained in storytelling. In 2½ years before this they planted 22 churches and brought 815 people to Christ. Within 6 months of using storytelling they planted 218 churches and saw 5372 people come to Christ<sup>1</sup>! Despite this astonishing statistic, storytelling should not be seen as a quick-fix for instant results, but it is very powerful and effective over time.

## Bible Reading as Storytelling

This guide teaches you how to re-tell bible stories in your own words, but the simplest way to do bible storytelling goes like this:

1. Tell a story to give the context or background for the bible passage.
2. Then say "This is the start of the bible story" and read the story from the bible.
3. At the end of the reading say "This is the end of the bible story".
4. Then lead into a discussion.

Although this approach is very easy, it cannot be done by people who cannot read, or where the bible is not in their preferred dialect.

Also, most experienced bible storytellers find it is better to re-tell stories as if you were an eye-witness. This makes the story much more engaging for both the storyteller and the listeners, and leads to better discussion and clearer personal application.

## Preparing the Story

The first step is to consider if any **minor** changes should be made to the story so it can be understood in the listener's culture. The group should discuss:

- Changing or omitting names of people, places, plants or animals.
- Using more cultural idioms or illustrations.
- Using names instead of "he"/"she"/"they"/"it" if it makes it clearer.
- Adding any **necessary** background details that the hearers would not know.

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by "Simply the Story" at <http://simplythestory.org/>

- Replace religious terms with words they would understand.

Any changes to the story should be **minimal** and **necessary** to make difficult words or idioms easier to understand. Do not change things just because you don't like them, or you do not understand them or because they are culturally offensive.

There are often important details in bible stories that the storyteller may not have noticed. If we omit those details we prevent the Holy Spirit from using them in a hearer's heart.

Bible stories often include features that make the story work, such as:

- small details
- repetition
- surprise
- omitting information (for instance, by **not** telling us how the key character responded, the story invites us to think about our own response)

Our stories should retain these powerful aspects.

## Translating the Story

If the story cannot be read in the dialect of the listeners, it must be translated. This should be done with a group of dialect-speakers plus at least two bi-lingual people if at all possible. They do not have to be believers, they just have to be willing helpers.

1. Go through the story twice, translating phrase by phrase, ensuring that all the detail is retained – nothing added and nothing left out.
2. Ask the dialect-speakers lots of questions about the story details and translate the answers back into the trainer's language. This allows you to check the detail is correct.
3. Translate the story once more to the dialect speakers.
4. Get the dialect speakers to re-tell the story and cross-check each other for correctness.
5. Let the dialect-speakers agree with the translators on the best exact wording to use.
6. Tell the dialect speakers that they are the custodians of that story for their community. They must practice the story and make sure they can retell it accurately.
7. If anyone is able to write the story in the dialect that would be a good additional step. A community leader could collect the written stories as a community treasure.

## Learning the Bible Story

Having agreed on any minor changes or translation of the bible story, it is time to teach it. Even small children really enjoy this.

Learning bible stories is best done in pairs or small groups, it is much more difficult on your own. Choose one person to be the "teacher".

1. The "teacher" should read the story to the group **twice**.
2. The "teacher" then asks lots of questions about the story details.
3. The "teacher" should read the story to the group again.
4. One person now tells the story back (the teacher can use gestures as prompts). If any mistakes are made, the group should correct it. If the group does not notice the mistake, the teacher should correct it.
5. Continue with this practice until everyone has retold the story.
6. Get the group to act out the story. Have fun – but make sure the story is told exactly.

## Acting out stories

Acting out a story is a really powerful way to learn the story and to learn from the story. In oral cultures where the story must be passed on orally, it should always be acted out by the learners as part of the learning process.

When telling stories it is natural to use hand gestures. You can also use your whole body and even get your listeners to take part in acting the story out. People often tell personal stories like this, getting the hearer to take

the part of another person in the story. Children especially like to be involved in this way – but be careful with adults; some feel really embarrassed if you try to draw them into the story in this way.

If using a story for teaching, two or more team members could act out the story. You could include poems, songs, dances... Anything that God inspires you to do to help communicate the story.

## Discussing the Story

After teaching a bible story the group should take time to discuss it. This is really important so that the trainer can check that the apprentices have properly understood the story. If there any misunderstandings, discuss them to see if the story should be adjusted at all. These are the **storyteller questions**:

1. What did you like about the story?
2. What questions do you have about the story?

They can then let the discussion progress freely or use the four Growth Group questions. The discussion should always end with the last two GG questions:

3. What does Jesus want to say to me personally?
4. Who does Jesus want me to share this message with?

## No Experts

We must not allow the trainer or anyone else to appear like an expert with special knowledge.

During story discussion, if anyone tries to teach anything that is not found in the story, ask "Where is that in the story?" or if anyone asks a question that cannot be answered from the story say, "The story doesn't tell us".

If the point being discussed came up in a previous story the group has learnt you should remind them of that story. Or if the point is important, but hasn't yet been covered, you can teach the bible story that does answer the question (you may suggest you teach it at the next meeting).

## Learning by Telling

Telling the story is the best way to learn it, so everyone who has learnt the story should be strongly encouraged to teach (or at least tell) the story to someone else within 24 hours of learning it. They should tell the story to at least five people during the first week. They can tell it to family, friends, other church members – anyone, as long as they tell it at least five times in the first week. Expect God to do amazing things as you tell these stories. Many people have been saved and healed through apprentices practicing their story-telling!

## Learning by Singing

If the story can be turned into a song, that will also be a powerful way of reinforcing the story. The song could just tell the essential details, or it may be a word accurate retelling. Either can be really helpful in keeping the story alive in the community. It is best if the song is in the traditional form, rather than mimicking a western or other-culture style.

## Using Pictures and Symbols

Nearly all experienced storytellers say NEVER USE PICTURES! Experience has shown that pictures can be distracting, confusing and inhibit the storyteller. Pictures or cartoons may be used to help learn a story plot, but should **never** be used as prompts whilst telling the story. Trust us! Pictures spoil storytelling.

However the bible makes much use of symbols and metaphors. A single symbol for a story, or story set, may be useful. Here are some examples:

- A beautiful flower
- A candle
- A bowl of water
- A whip or stick
- Thorns
- Staple food (bread, cassava, rice etc).

A symbol can reduce distractions by giving people something to look at while they are thinking about a story you have just told. The symbol may help them to formulate questions or engage in discussion. It can also serve as a reminder for the story. The hearers could be encouraged to put an object in their home to act as a symbol to remind them to think about the story.

## **Accurate and Authoritative**

When teaching stories in an oral culture without ready access to the text in their dialect, it is essential that stories are taught for complete accuracy because they have no other way of checking it is accurate and therefore authoritative. Also, Growth Groups need to discuss the accurate and authoritative story.

However, all our bibles are translations from the original languages, so there is no "correct" translation. We must trust that the Holy Spirit will teach us what He wants through the translations we have.

We must try our best to teach bible stories using words which communicate the story in the target culture as clearly as possible, and as close as possible to the best translations we have available to us.

## **Preparing an Eye-witness Story**

Everything we have discussed so far has been about teaching bible stories to oral cultures so they can be passed on accurately for discipleship.

We now discuss some ideas for story telling when you are not passing the story on, but simple teaching from the story.

The most engaging stories are those told by eye-witnesses. We may want to tell our bible stories as if we were there when we use them in evangelism or preaching / teaching.

It is really important when preparing to tell a story in this way

that you do NOT try to memorise the words, and DO NOT write it down! You only need to memorise the plot and essential details. Every time you tell the story it should be fresh and appropriate to your listener, just as you would tell any story from your past.

In fact, making the bible story into **your** story is what you need to do. You need to visualise the story as if you were an eye-witness, to the point where it becomes your story.

1. Each member of the group now needs to take some time to imagine being an eye witness to the story.
2. Now they must practice telling the story in their own words like an eye-witness. This can be done in the group or in pairs or even on their own (but still out loud - telling it in your head is a poor way to learn.) The members of the group should help each another to make their stories clearer and more engaging. The group might end up agreeing on the best way to tell the story, but it is fine to have several different versions. The important thing is that each person should be really happy and confident with their story.

## **Stories for Evangelism**

Storytelling is possibly the most effective tool for evangelism, and makes evangelism easier. But Evangelism is still mostly long, slow, hard work. Because of that we must remember it is God's work, needing His help and empowerment:

Colossians 4:2-6 "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

2 Corinthians 4:2-4 "Nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

## Should we include OT stories?

People need to understand why they need Jesus. Enough preparation must be done so that our listener will become a whole-hearted disciple of Jesus. Two-thirds of the bible is Old Testament, preparing the ground for Jesus. The number of OT stories needed before telling Gospel stories will depend on the listeners. More OT stories can be told later as they become relevant.

## Selecting Appropriate Stories

Although a brief selection of commonly used stories will get you started, it is most important that you develop your own set that work for you and for your cultural setting. If you don't develop your own evangelistic story set, you will very likely soon give up using storytelling, and revert to your previous methods for trying to tell people about Jesus.

To get you started, think of a particular person or group that you want to share the Gospel with. Write down what you think are the major obstacles to obedience to Jesus? Here are some possibilities:

- All religions are the same
- Christianity is only for weak or gullible people
- Science has disproved God.
- Christianity is a Western religion.
- The Bible is full of contradictions and lies.
- It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you try to be good.
- Religion has done more harm than good.
- Christianity just tells people to go to church and be miserable.
- Following Jesus won't help me get through my troubles.

Now try to think of a story that might challenge that false belief. If you can't think of a bible story, can you think of a non-bible story, such as someone's testimony, or a film or a fictional story that could help? Is there a traditional cultural story, or a current news story you could use? Or perhaps the Holy Spirit will help you invent a story, just like He inspired Jesus to invent stories.

Once you have told your first story, perhaps your listener will invite you to tell another. At an appropriate point you can start to introduce suitable bible stories. It is usual to have to tell at least five stories before someone's world view begins to change.

## Basic Evangelistic Set

It is good to have a basic set of stories for evangelism.

Write a list of all the bible stories you can think of and then try to select the stories you think are essential in a basic set that you would usually try to include. This would usually be between 12 and 20 stories, with half to two-thirds from the OT.

Here is a framework to get you started:

1. Creation (Genesis 1-2)
2. Rebellion (Genesis 3)
3. Abraham (Genesis 12-24) 12:1-3, 16, 17:16-22, 18:10-14, 21:1-7, 22
4. Exodus (Exodus 1-12)
5. Jesus birth
6. Jesus Ministry
7. Crucifixion
8. Resurrection.

You will need to look at the bible passages and gospels to decide what stories you want to include in your basic set, and make a separate list of stories you could include if they seem helpful in a given situation.

Other OT stories to consider in your basic set:

- The Tower of Babel
- The Flood

- The Ten Commandments (concluding with Ex 20:18-19)
- Tabernacle with its curtain
- Day of Atonement
- Promise of a future Messiah

Are there other OT stories that you have used to powerful effect in evangelism? Do you want to include any of these in your basic set?

## **Jesus Ministry Stories**

Start by selecting between five and seven stories. Some possibilities are:

- Use the seven signs from John's Gospel:
  1. Water into wine, John 2:1-12
  2. Healing of official's son, John 4:46-54
  3. Healing of paralytic at pool, John 5:1-17
  4. Jesus feeds five thousand, John 6:1-14
  5. Jesus walks on the water, John 6:15-25
  6. Healing of man born blind, John 9:1-41
  7. Raising of Lazarus, John 11:1-46
- Select stories from any of the gospels that show Jesus' authority, e.g.:
  1. Healing a woman from evil spirits, Luke 13:10-17
  2. Demons recognise who Jesus is, Mark 1:21-28
  3. Calming of the Storm, Mark 4:35-41
  4. Man let through the roof, Mark 2:1-12
  5. Raising of Lazarus, John 11
- Make selections from Luke followed by showing the Jesus film.

Are there particular Gospel stories or parables that you have used to powerful effect in evangelism? Do you want to include any of these in your basic set?

## **The Good and the Bad**

It is really important to include stories of God's people doing bad things, such as Abraham's treatment of Hagar, David's adultery and murder, Peter's denial and Paul's troubles with other Christian leaders. These stories emphasise that Christianity is for bad people that need Jesus' forgiveness, not just for good people.

## **Concluding Stories**

The resurrection story should include the ascension (Acts 1:1-11).

After telling that story you may want to conclude with one or more stories from Acts to show the impact of the Gospel and the role of the Holy Spirit.

## **Evangelism using Storytelling**

### **Getting Started**

The simplest way to tell a stranger a bible story is to start by asking them to tell you about themselves then, when you get a feel for the person, tell them you are a story-teller and ask if they would let you tell them a story. You can start with a story that fits with something they have told you, or simply tell the first two Genesis stories (creation and fall). If the listener seems interested try to get into a discussion.

### **Discussion**

The hope is that the story will cause the hearer to ask a question that leads to a discussion. You can ask the **storyteller questions** to get the discussion started:

1. What did you like about the story?
2. What questions do you have about the story?

You can then let the discussion progress freely or use the four Growth Group questions. Try to lead the discussion towards your next story.

### **Leave them wanting more**

Whilst the person is eager to hear more you can further stories as but always stop **before** they want you to, so they will ask you to come back and tell more. End with suspense – "I wonder what will happen next..."

### **Telling the Next Story**

When you have the opportunity to tell the next story, it is usually good to get the person or group to tell you what they remember of the previous story you told them. You can then have a discussion of what they have been thinking about the last story before going on to the next.

### **Link the stories together**

Where stories do not directly follow on from the previous one, you will have to explain very briefly how the stories connect so the hearer can see there is a progression through the stories leading to the climax of Pentecost.

## **Discipling using Storytelling**

Storytelling is also a really effective tool for discipling Christians. After all, it is how Jesus trained His disciples. Look again at the introductory paragraph "Why Use Storytelling". The points listed apply as much to believers as to non-believers. Story telling in a Growth Group is good because:

- It enables non-readers to participate in Growth Groups.
- It trains the members in storytelling for evangelism.
- It is a really good way of stimulating discussion.

Once the group has learnt the story they can start with the **storyteller questions**:

1. What did you like about the story?
2. What questions do you have about the story?

Then discuss what the story tells them, using the GG questions:

1. What does this tell us about people's character or nature?
2. What does this tell us about Jesus or God?
3. What does Jesus want to say to me personally?
4. Who does Jesus want me to share this message with?

The last question will help the group members to go and find someone else to tell the story to.

## **Preaching and Teaching using Storytelling**

Since Jesus used storytelling for much of His preaching, we should learn from His example and also use storytelling whenever we can in our preaching and teaching. If you are preaching to a small group, you can tell the story and then lead the group in discussion. If it is not possible to get group discussion, you can follow the story with your own questions, which you then explore on behalf of the listeners. This style of preaching and teaching has been found to be really effective in every conceivable context including university lectures!

The next time you preach, try using this method:

- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to a bible story to tell.
- Prepare the story as shown above.
- Instead of preparing to preach, think about the questions that you think your hearers might want to ask, and make a note of them.
- Pray and think about your answers.
- Instead of preaching, tell the story and lead into discussion.

## Storytelling for non-narrative scripture

The bible is not all written as stories, but all scripture is part of at least two stories; God's story of redemption and the story of the person who wrote that portion of scripture. The laws and genealogies are part of the story of Israel. The Psalms come out of David's (and other people's) life story. The prophets fit into the story of Israel and they have their own personal stories with God. The epistles all have a story behind them and stories within them.

It takes a bit more work to research the stories behind the non-narrative scriptures, and sometimes those stories have to be imagined. But it is still worthwhile, because the stories provide the context for the scripture and make them more relevant and applicable.

Consider the little Old Testament book Obadiah. You have probably never preached from it or heard it preached from. It is a prophecy against Edom for abandoning Israel when it was being attacked. It ends with the coming of God's Kingdom. As a prophecy it seems to have little relevance now which is why it is so neglected. But tell this as a story from the perspective of an eye-witness and it becomes gripping, urgent, relevant, engaging and provokes many really important questions. As a story it can relate to neighbouring communities struggling with Covid or Ebola or floods or poverty. It is about grievances, justice, forgiveness. It's about the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God. It's about our hope in the Kingdom in the face of current defeat. As a story, Obadiah becomes a story that has to be told because it is so relevant and raw.

Or take Philemon, a very short letter in the New Testament. You have probably never preached from it or heard it preached from. It is Paul writing to a friend, asking him to free his slave. As a letter, it seems to have little relevance now which is why it is so neglected. But tell this as a story - as an eye-witness or as the slave - and it becomes gripping, urgent, relevant, engaging and provokes many really important questions. Now it is about your future being in the hands of influential friends; about regret and shame for your past; about fear for your future; about friends trying to influence each other; about the role of leadership in difficult situations; about emotional pressure and expectations. It's about communicating difficult things by letter; about the influence of an apostle in a local church; about leaders asking for favours. It raises questions like "Is Paul the same kind of example for us as Jesus?", "Was Paul right to do this?"

As a story, Philemon becomes a story that has to be told because it is so relevant to personal relationships and expectations within the body of Christ.

The same principal applies to all scripture. You can take a small section, think about its context and tell it as a story. You may need to use a study-bible or commentary to help you discover the story behind the passage and you may have to imagine parts of the story. But when you tell the story as an eye-witness it provokes the questions that lead to deep discussion and application.

With non-narrative bible passages you will probably mix story-telling with reading the text. So you might start with a story to set the scene, then read a few verses, then insert some more story to help explain what comes next, or to help the listeners put themselves into the story, or suggest the questions we might want to ask. Then read more bible-text and so on. You just need to make it clear which bits you have invented, and which bits are from the bible. You also need to make it clear that the listeners should use their own imagination, and not assume that what you have invented is "correct". So you might say "I imagine Paul was thinking ..., what do you imagine he was thinking?"

## Teaching Doctrine and Theology in Stories

We are used to preaching through the New Testament epistles to teach doctrine and theology, but Jesus didn't do that! Jesus taught theology through stories. There is no important doctrine or theological truth that is missing from the Gospels in either a story or in direct teaching. The one important doctrine that is less obvious is the Church functioning in harmony as the Body of Christ, but even that comes pretty naturally from the teaching about love, the prayer for unity and Jesus describing the church as His bride.

The great advantage of teaching doctrine through stories is that stories lead directly to the application of the doctrine, instead of making them academic and abstract.

So the next time you want to teach a particular bible truth, why don't you look for an appropriate bible story and use that as your starting point? Material from the epistles can then be used in support of the story.



## **School Teaching with Stories**

Storytelling is so powerful it can be used to teach much of the official curriculum in schools! It takes a bit of work to create stories to teach the curriculum, but it can make it much more fun and memorable for both the teachers and the students. It is easier to see how this can be done for history and English, but even parts of maths and physics has been taught effectively through storytelling!

## **Resources**

There are many bible storytelling organisations and websites. Here are just a few:

Storying The Scriptures: <http://storyingthescriptures.com/>

Simply The Story: <http://simplythestory.org/>

The Bible Storyteller: <https://www.biblestoryteller.co.uk/>

Bible Telling: <https://www.bibletelling.org/>

Bible Storytelling: <http://www.biblestorytelling.org/>

Scripture In Use: <https://siutraining.org/>