

The Story

Jesus' story and our story.

Each of us has a life story. Our stories contain episodes of pain and pleasure, hope and despair, faithfulness and faithlessness. If we were to keep a journal of our soul's pilgrimage through life it would tell our story. Our understanding of and feeling about our story play a big part in our sense of wellbeing, our day-to-day decisions, and our relationships. We long to be in relationship with others who understand and even share our story. Such relationships authenticate us, give us hope, and foster a level of intimacy that empowers us to live lives of courage and caring. My wife and I have found a special bond and strength from our contact with other parents who live with a special child, especially an autistic child. We found that our feelings of anger, despair, hope, and frustration were not unique, but shared by others in similar circumstances. Fellowship is a word that we use to describe those who share our story in whole or in part. The point of the gospel is that Jesus invites us to share his story. He waits for us to enter into his story and know him through it. As we partake in his life, experience his power, feel his suffering, and live in his hope, we walk with him and share his story. In sharing his story, we abide with him and have fellowship with him.

Knowing Jesus is more than "knowing about him." It is more than knowing and following his ethical teaching or even believing in him. Participation in his suffering, death and resurrection is a vital and often neglected part of knowing him. Following Jesus mean that we take up a cross, that we be willing to go with him where his life leads, that we share life's experiences through his eyes and heart, that we share his story as our own. If we are to profit from pain we must be willing to dignify suffering as a sharing of Jesus' life story. Shared experiences can be powerful bonding agents.

In this chapter I want to lead you through some steps that will help you align your story with Jesus' story.

1. Refuse to be only a spectator of Jesus' story.

Before we proceed, it is important to appreciate the power in a shared story. Tell me about yourself. Better yet, let me walk with you and share your experiences so that I might know you. I can know you on a deep level if I am allowed to share core life experiences with you. When our children were small we would often go to a neighborhood swimming pool on hot summer afternoons. I would sit by the pool and talk with friends while my children frolicked in the water. As much as they loved the water-play with their friends, there was always something special about getting in the water with them and playing. When the parents entered the pool and played with the kids, the kids experienced a new level of energy. Something wonderful was taking place. We parents moved from being spectators to participants. It was in the participation that a

bonding experience took place. It was a shared experience that brought us all closer together. It is one thing to know about the life of Jesus – his suffering, and glory. But it is not as spectators to his life that we are drawn close to him. We are bonded with him as we share his experience, as our life story and his run on the same track.

My uncle, who was a bomber pilot in the Second World War and also in Korea, travels across the country every three years to spend time with his old crew. What was it that drew these men, who had little else in common, to sacrifice time and money to be with one another decades after their time together in war? Men who have been in battle together or played sports together at a high level know each other in a special way. Comrades in arms often have a bond and an intimacy that seems to transcend even the closeness of their relationship with their mate and family. There is something about sharing glory and especially trauma that binds us together with an intimacy of fellowship that is hard to explain or break. We will derive a great sense of connecting with others from our ability to identify ourselves with others and to share fully in their needs and hopes. A personal relationship with Jesus is forged in exactly the same way. We know him as we share core kingdom and life experiences with him. We know him as we share the end of self in his death, the power of new life in his resurrection and also the pain of his suffering in our pain.

Carol Zaleski's article in First Things (#133) writes of *The Dark Night of Mother Teresa*. Zaleski describes long periods where this great woman of God struggled with her faith and a feeling of abandonment by God. She responded by turning her feelings of abandonment by God into an act of abandonment *to* God. She reckoned it as her participation in the thirst Jesus suffered on the Cross. It gave her access to the deepest poverty of the modern world: the poverty of meaninglessness and loneliness. Through all of this trial she was determined to keep her resolve to be "an apostle of joy" a joy that can only come from sharing the "fellowship of His suffering."

Of course, not every one responds to suffering so as to know God. In many cases, suffering results in feeling more distant from God, even bitter and full of doubt. Our willingness to view our pain as a sharing of Christ's suffering is key to meeting God in the experiences. We come to know Him when we realize that the shame we feel for our sin is but a small part of the shame that he endured for us. Our experience of injustice is but a taste of his mistreatment. Our pain in the face of seemingly senseless hardship allows us to know the fallen world as he experienced it. Tasting life is an important part of experiencing a relationship with Jesus. But we cannot realize this strange blessing if we are confused about our hope and trying to deny our pain.

2. Resist the temptation to "cook the books" of your life story.

The desert fathers of North Africa discovered aspects of the Christian experience that many of us in our busyness and obsession with efficiency and comfort may never appreciate. They sought a posture of retreat from distractions of this life for the purpose

of learning from solitude the way of love. Their spirituality had three objectives - to look, to weep, and to live. The emptiness of the desert mirrored the emptiness of life, it was as they took away all the distractions of this life that they could see the great nothingness that exists apart from God. Their insight would lead to the kind of deep weeping that can only come from a desperate soul in touch with the brokenness of its world. It was from this posture of mourning that they would find a quality of life that was truly abundant. When Jesus said, "blessed are those who weep for they shall be comforted" (Matt.5:4) he was not saying that they would "be comfortable" but rather that they like "those who are poor in spirit" (vs.3) would find the kingdom of heaven. The path to life is through walking in the light of the reality of brokenness, suffering, and weeping.

This generation, more than the previous generation seems aware of the story of suffering. While every generation has experienced suffering, the present generation of young adults is not as apt to dismiss pain as quickly as previous generations. My kids do not buy into the hopes that characterized their parent's world in times of stress. The present generation has a growing disillusionment with the previous generation's confident assurances of truth and hope. Modern science was touted as the answer to most, if not all the important questions of life as I was growing to adulthood. But science and technology have left us lonely and empty, with too much information and too little meaning. We have too much to live with and not enough to live for. We were led to believe that we had it all figured out only to discover that there was so much that we were missing. We could explain more fully how the human body worked but seemed unable to understand what it meant to be human.

We were led to believe that enlightened western culture was the standard by which all other cultures were measured but then were embarrassed by the shallowness of our cultural wisdom as it tried to speak to the deep issues of the human soul. Westerners have been tempted to turn to ancient eastern myths in hopes of finding peace. Pundits refer to this shift away from confidence in modernism as postmodernism. Postmodernism is simply disillusionment with many of the "sacred cows" of modernism. Postmodern thinkers are no longer sure about much of anything. The postmodern mind is not sure that anyone can know the truth, if indeed there is an objective truth common to all that can be known.

The postmodern generation early learned to be suspicious of Camelot. Camelot (fantasy) Christianity is most often cultivated in the culture of what pop-sociologists call "baby boomers": those individuals who were born in the 1950s. They tended to be optimistic, certain, and confident in their hopes. They tended to see the world through rose-colored glasses, while trusting rules and authority, and expecting heaven on earth. They had to shut their eyes to a lot of the dark side of life that did not fit their expectations. They lived in a world that had to make sense even if they had to "cook the books" of their image of life to have it turn out looking "right".

Children and grandchildren of the baby boomers are not so optimistic or positive. They struggle with some basic “heart” questions that are deeper than the “head” questions of their parents and grandparents were answering with great confidence. I have a friend from India who illustrates the thinking of a postmodern mind. He came to faith in Christ as a student at UNC. After years of following Christ he had to face the harsh reality that the person who had introduced him to the faith had fallen away because of the influence of historical-critical scholarship. I asked my friend how he had been able to avoid a similar fate. He shared that for him the first question that he sought to answer as he read the Bible was not, “Is this book authentic and can I believe it is inspired?” but rather “Is there an answer to my soul’s sorrow and guilt in the message of this book?” When he read the gospel story, he was moved to faith and it was in the context of faith that he began a critical enquiry into the challenges of the authenticity of the Biblical text. When Jesus said that he came to save those who were lost and that those who had ears to hear would hear, he was speaking to one and the same group. He did not come to satisfy inquiring minds so much as heal broken hearts. The postmodern generation is a generation of the heart. It is a generation that has an ear to hear “the story” of life as told from the perspective of the heart.

My friend focused on the one part of the gospel story that transcends the modern / postmodern disconnect. He was listening with ears that were connected to a life that all humans are capable of appreciating, a life that knows the sorrow of a soul alienated from itself, its environment, and God.

3. Become familiar with the elements that make up our shared story.

One of the interesting challenges of postmodern skepticism to the Christian world view, is the old problem of “common ground.” Are there some base-line truths or universal assumptions that apply to humans across time and space? Are there “meta-narratives” or templates that apply to every person’s story? Consider the following characteristics that seem to separate humans from lower forms of animal life.

First, humans have the capacity to **dream and hope**: to envision things that do not presently exist, to see with the imagination. Animals are led by instinct while humans are influenced by imagination. Animals do not create art. Animals do not practice religion. Animals do not tell stories. Stories, art, and religion belong to humans alone.

Humans seem to have a unique **awareness of themselves**. With this awareness come the second and third unique characteristics. The second is a sense of **conscience** or moral responsibility that includes the third, an **independent will**. As humans, we feel pride for accomplishment and shame for failure. We feel love and also anger in response to how others relate to us. While some animals may display emotion it is unlikely that they share anything like the sense of self that characterizes humans across all cultures and periods of history.

These common human characteristics are related to common themes that are picked up in every culture. **Suffering** is one of them. It is a universal challenge and therefore is a part of everyone's story. I am using the term "suffering" to include more than physical pain. I am including all that comes with emotional and spiritual isolation. **Love** is a universal longing and is also a part of the human story. **Hope** is a universal energizer and is a part of the universal story.

These characteristics form a foundation upon which we can communicate with people from any culture or time in history. The classic wisdom literature of the Bible is as relevant to us today as it was to those who first read it, even though our cultures may be very different. This is why we can talk about certain subjects like pain, ideals, shame, pride etc. and expect to be understood by those who live in an entirely different cultural setting. When the son or daughter of a dignitary in a foreign nation is killed in an accident, our president and the people of our nation extend a heart of condolence because we all instinctively feel the pain even if we cannot speak the language, know the customs, or believe the religion. This is why we can understand Luther's profound insight in reading Paul. The gospel story is a universal template understood by every heart that hungers and thirsts for reconciliation with God, others, and the creation.

It is not surprising that the Biblical message is developed around several large narratives that tell stories of hope, suffering, and love. The story of Abraham and his family is an example. Abraham's story is the story of a nation, Israel and the vision of a promised land that is a hope realized through suffering, obedience, faith, and love. Moses and the Exodus story is another narrative developed within the context of Israel's history. The exodus is a story of suffering, deliverance, hope, faith, obedience, and love.

In many ways, the whole Old Testament is a story waiting for an ending, a final word. The message of Jesus is presented as the missing part of the Old Testament story. The story of Jesus and the cross pick up the themes of the Old Testament and finish the story. The gospel is the ultimate message of suffering, love, and hope. For this reason the gospel story is a story for all seasons, cultures, and times. We know Jesus and talk about him expecting others to understand us when we tell the story in terms of suffering, love, and hope. His story is one that invites participation, not just spectators. Only as we share in his story can we know who we really are meant to be. For in the sharing of his suffering, hope, and love we understand the essence of our humanness.

4. Become sensitized to the stories of those around you.

One of the greatest complements you can pay to another human being is to show a genuine interest in their life story. There are few things more affirming to you than the sincere interest of another person in your story. As they move toward you with a genuine desire to know what has shaped and is shaping the contours of your soul, you will feel a sense of community with them. Connecting takes place as we tell and hear each other's stories. But how can a person break the ice so as to get the scoop on a life story? First,

there must be a genuine interest in hearing the story. Pray for such a passion to characterize your relationships if it is not already there. Second, be patient. It takes time to tell and hear a story, especially when we may not be used to unpacking our experiences and feelings to others. Third, ask questions. Some of the most helpful questions might look like this. “Who has influenced you at various stages of your life?” “How have you learned to deal with the disappointments of a fallen world?” “What is it that really gets you going (motivates you) when you wake up in the morning?” “What has given you the greatest satisfaction and pleasure in this life?” “What has hurt the most?” “Has your view of God disappointed you?” These questions should get you started on the fascinating exploration of a person’s life story.

The challenge of postmodernism is not only one of finding a “common story” or language of human experience but also one of objectivity in seeking the truth. It is the story that we share and learn as we listen to each other that binds us together. We need to listen to each other’s perspective if we are to be assured of the truth. We are a part of a community of understanding.

Where a previous generation was quite confident of its objectivity this generation has been forced to question itself and its perspective of the truth. Our vision of the truth needs to be notarized and often refined by the perspective of others. This is why the community of the worldwide church is so important. One of the characteristics of secularization has been the bringing of peoples of all continents into communication with each other. As a result, more and more people read the same news, share the same ideas, worry about the same problems, and dream the same dreams. It is possible to have more confidence in the basics of our common story than ever before. We may see but a part of the whole, however. It is in the hearing of another’s story that we come to see our own story more clearly. It is in sharing in a community of others with similar stories that we have our own story ratified, validated, and refined.

An ancient Hindu fable by John Godfrey Saxes says it well.

The Blind men and the Elephant

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,

At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
this wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

Christians are aware that faith in Christ is an important part of knowing the truth. He is the one who enables a person to see what could not be seen without a faith relationship with him. I might take the liberty of adding a few verses to the above classic with the hope that it tells the rest of the story.

But Jesus made a bolder claim,
as prophet of the light,
who touched a man with blinded eyes,
and gave him perfect sight,
and looking in his healer's face,
this man saw God aright.

We, like the man that Jesus touched
Have eyes that need be clear
And like the six of Indostan
Each other's witness hear
So as we seek the truth of God
We to His Son draw near.

But woe to those of swaggered heart
As prophets I recall
Spoke of the pride and arrogance
That goes before the fall.
For those who claim alone to see
May scarcely see at all.

But some will say, "There is no beast."
But only words and fears
That create for us a fantasy
To wipe away our tears.
But such live in a different world
And not in Indostan.
Where something called an elephant
Does often step on man.

And so, the elephant we seek
That we might wiser be
and in our quest we hope to gain
the gift that lets us see
the truth that lives,
the truth that heals,
the truth that sets us free.

5. Know the Biblical story.

So how do we enter Jesus' story?" First, we must know the Biblical story. It, after all, is the window into life that keeps us in touch with the real world. The Biblical story also tells us the story of Jesus. Read the gospels in a modern translation. I have found Eugene Petersen's *The Message* to be very helpful here. As you read look for the story line between the events recorded in the gospel record. What would it feel like to walk in Jesus' shoes? When did he feel alone? When did he feel connected with others? What are the points where his story comes closest to parts of my story?

Second, we must put together the basic elements in our own story. We must clearly identify the feelings, facts, behaviors, and attitudes that shape the contours of our own souls. We must be "in touch with" of our feelings, observations, perspectives, and hopes. Third, we must expect our lives to be an unfolding drama where we respond to life's ups and downs with insight. The challenge is not so much to find good weather as to sail well in all weather. I would suggest a personal journal where you make entries on three levels – fears, hopes, and pain. What am I afraid of, what do I long for, where does it hurt? Some have suggested the discipline of writing a psalm at the end of each week or month. Let the psalm capture the mood of your journey over that period of time. As King David wrote psalm 22 he was telling his story. But surprise, surprise, it was also Jesus' story. David's heart was tracking with Jesus' heart. Jesus identified himself as "Son of David" for several reasons. One reason may have been the fact that David and Jesus shared elements of a common story.

So let us summarize this chapter. Knowing Jesus is not only knowing about him or knowing and following his ethical teaching. It is participation in his suffering, death and resurrection by walking with him. This is possible as we identify with him in his story. This story is to be told in the universal language of suffering, hope, and love. We can, with confidence, expect this story to be understood and to touch the soul- sorrow of every human. It is in the sharing of the elements of this story in our own experience that we come to be fully human, knowing both our dignity and our depravity, knowing both our calling and our condition in a fallen world. It is by listening to the story of Jesus and of others that we come to more clearly understand our own story. If we are to turn our pain into a spiritually positive experience of knowing God we must first be able to see our life story in the shadow of Jesus' life. The next two chapters will illustrate how this can happen as we look at real life stories that invite us to walk with Jesus.