

Story telling helps

by Grant Thorpe

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Whoever teaches children, whether at home or at Church groups - must speak 'the very words of God' (1 Peter 4:11). This should not intimidate us. Rather, it should make us eager to hear the word of God so as to bring this great gift to the children. Here are some pointers to hearing that word and showing it to the children.

Trust the Bible to shape what you say

God asks us to teach our children that he has saved us and them, and how this has happened (Deut. 6:4-7, 20-25). His first discipline of us is to save us (Deut. 4:36; 11:1-7), so, if we are to bring our children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4) they need to know this large story of God's saving action (Acts 20:27, 32). The Bible is structured to proclaim this truth to people of all ages. It is especially effective when told by people who know that this is their story and who believe that the promise of this life belongs to their children as well as to them (Acts 2:39). By gradually telling this story of salvation, children can come to know their family history, and know their place in it.

Find (and then show) the action of God in the passage

The easiest thing to do when preparing a Bible story is to observe the actions of the people in it and to make this the basis for a behavioural lesson—in other words, to say 'These are the things we should do and the things we should not do.' It is not wrong to find behavioural lessons in the Bible (for example, see Exod. 24:12; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11) but it is not the emphasis of the Bible itself. God is eager that we see his side of the story—his purpose, his joy, his certainty, his saving action, his renewal, his hope, his Son. This is all the more so in the parts of the Bible that recount the appalling failure of the world or of God's people. God directs us to the covenant he has made with his people, the covenant he is keeping—even when he judges them, and the covenant he will fulfill. Every action of his has to do with Jesus Christ and him being full of grace and truth. All of the Old Testament prepares for this. All of the New Testament proclaims this.

If the story is the sower and the seed (Matt. 13:1-9), the main point is not that we should be good soil but that we should hear the word of the kingdom. The only command in the story is 'He who has ears, let him hear.' While it is good to take notice of the warning about the word being taken away, dried up, or choked by riches and cares, the action to take is to hear the word of Christ because it is only his word that can change bad soil into good soil. As you prepare the lesson, resolve to give the good word of the kingdom to the children, trusting him for the result! Some will not respond but some will, and there will be a harvest. Jesus explained that he did not use stories to make his message understandable but to keep it for those to whom it was given to understand. God is the one who makes his message effective, not us, and not the children to whom we speak.

If the story is the greatness of David in overcoming his enemies, the main point is not that we should all be brave and have similar victories to David but that God loved his people and anointed David as king to save them from their enemies. He did this with David because of his purpose to give the world a Saviour. Christ is now our King, and God has given him and gives him victories for us to share. If we wish to follow in David's steps (and we should), then show the children *what* David believed so that they may have the same faith as him.

Find (and show) how the action of God brings us to grace and truth

The Bible constantly shows people being humbled by the kindness of God. Often times, this is preceded by judgments because they, like ourselves, are stubborn, but, if we read the story in its wider context, the story becomes the triumph of grace in the humbling of a people who now delight in God.

If the story is Peter's denials, the point is not that we should bravely stand up for Christ (though we should) but that Jesus trained Peter to rely on him instead of bragging about his faithfulness. How strong and gentle Peter was after this! His strength was coming from Christ now. He was a lover of grace, not of himself.

If the story is Ruth, the point is not about Naomi being pleasant, or about Ruth's kindness to her mother in law (though both of these are important to the story). Rather, it is about a woman whose life was formed by the promises given to Israel and, even when her life, to her, was bitter, gave evidence to a Moabite widowed daughter in law of the desirability of Israel's God. Ruth encountered the faithfulness of this God through the faith of her mother-in-law and through Israel's provision of a kinsmen-redeemer for widows.

Be thankful to God for his action

Someone has observed that one of the missing ingredients of Western civilisation is a zest that arises from gratefulness. The enthusiasm needed for teaching comes from delight in God's sure action—in the Bible and in life. Don't tell the children to be grateful. Just be grateful and lead them in thanksgiving. It is infectious! It may be necessary, occasionally, to warn about ungratefulness, but your own gratefulness is primary.

Stories communicate truth to those who hear them, so keep attention on the characters, action and outcome.

Life itself is a narrative - with many facets and turns. Through Christ, we have been made part of God's story, so, telling Bible stories is not entertainment or an illustration for a moral, it is our own family history. We can tell it with relish, with understanding, with sympathy and without needing to tie off all the ends. If something seems untidy, then our confidence is in the end of God's story, not the resolution of every part of life as it happens.

Happy story time!

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