



The Pearl

of Great Worth

Find True Prosperity

By Judy L. Miller

Introduction by Grant Lovejoy

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

MATTHEW 13:44-46 ESV

Endorsements

Here comes an excellent resource for many who have pondered how to counter the material prosperity gospel that has ravaged African Christianity for several decades. What makes this resource unique is the departure from the usual deductive and analytical literature engaged in times past for this purpose. Using the Bible storying method, Judy Miller has engaged the wisdom that if you want to change a people's culture or worldview, you must be ready to change the stories they hear. I recommend this book for all African gospel ministers and disciplers, theological educators, and every single believer concerned about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and the genuine prosperity of their souls.

Ezekiel A. Ajibade, PhD

Regional Director, International Orality Network, Africa
President, African Homiletics Society

In *The Pearl of Great Worth*, Judy Miller and her team have systematically developed a theological understanding of the doctrine of God, man, and salvation that effectively guards against the all-too-prevalent teachings of the prosperity gospel. Gotthold Lessing suggested a "theoretical ditch" between eternal truth and biblical history, or as many "enlightened" theologians seem to have espoused, a ditch between biblical theology and systematic theology. *The Pearl* not only jumps this ditch but exposes the fallacy of its very existence by examining the theological implications of weaving the truths of Scripture's metanarrative into a cohesive theological argument. The stories of God's word are indeed worth all that we have. The eternal relationship they bring with the Creator is worth all that we are.

Stephen Stringer

Vice President of Global Strategy, SRV Partners

The Pearl of Great Worth elevates the Suffering Servant by using biblical stories to show that true faith leads to surrender and sacrifice. These stories expose the fallacy that if you have enough faith, health and wealth are imminent. Judy Miller masterfully connects biblical stories, real life examples, quotes from popular teachers, and probing questions to reveal that a life of faith is about hope, peace, and joy through trials, not a magic ticket to escape them. This work reveals that the prosperity gospel is a dressed-up form of animism and implores Africans, and all people, to believe in the transformational gospel of the Suffering Servant and to take that gospel to the nations.

Dr. Daren J. Davis

Global Engagement Leader, sub-Saharan Africa
International Mission Board, SBC

The prosperity gospel—a teaching focused on “health and wealth” at the expense of the gospel call to sacrifice and surrender—is ominously spreading around the world. With particular emphasis on equipping believers in sub-Saharan Africa, this resource counters that trend by using stories of the Bible to teach what true prosperity in Christ is. This work is more than a collection of stories to tell, however; it is a valuable toolbox that not only teaches the story, but that also offers background information, character sketches, key term definitions, and bibliographical materials. I trust God will use this work to raise up believers who understand true prosperity—and who will then themselves teach others to the ends of the earth.

Dr. Chuck Lawless

Vice-President for Spiritual Formation and Ministry Centers, Dean of Doctoral Studies, Senior Professor of Evangelism and Missions, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

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By Judy L. Miller



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the millions of people across sub-Saharan Africa and around the world who do not have adequate access to the entire Bible in your heart language. May you soon have access in your language to the greatest story ever told.

To those who have found themselves caught up in the prosperity gospel or the word of faith movement, we beg you: It is not too late. Turn away from this false teaching and follow God through faith in Jesus alone. He is enough. His kingdom is priceless and worth all that we have.

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Listen to *The Pearl of Great Worth* stories on audio and video: www.africaonmission.org/pearl

Introduction

by Grant Lovejoy

As the senior pastor of a prominent mega-church wrapped up a worship service, he urged the audience to come back to hear his next sermon. **“I’m going to tell you how to get what you want in life, and how to use God and the Bible to get it.”** Later the pastor was asked if that was what he had meant to say. Had it been a slip of the lip? The pastor said that he had meant just what he said. “I tell Christians how to get what they want in life, and how to use God and the Bible to get it.” The pastor was convinced that teaching people “how to use God and the Bible to get what they want in life” is the essence of effective, faithful Christian ministry.

Millions of professing Christians embrace that pastor’s belief, which is often called “the prosperity gospel.” Its core teaching is that God promises Christians physical health, material wealth, and success in this life if they exercise faith correctly. The prosperity gospel is also called the “health and wealth” movement. Its critics call it the “name it and claim it” approach because of its close connection with “word of faith” teaching. The popularity of the prosperity gospel is not hard to understand. People flock to hear speakers who can help them get what they desire in life. The thought that almighty God and the Christian holy book could be used in that way gives hope to people who see God and the Bible as sources of great power.

Proponents of the prosperity gospel believe that they honor God and bring blessings to people. But, in fact, prosperity preachers dishonor God by trying to treat God as if he were their servant. The Bible is clear, however, that people are created to serve God. The prosperity teaching gives a wrong understanding of

God. It does considerable other harm as well. For example, when people do not receive what they prayed for or “claimed,” they may consequently question God’s love, the Bible’s truthfulness, or both.

We offer this guide in love, believing that God’s people always do best when they understand Scripture accurately and obey it fully. We trust that it will lead participants to a better understanding of true biblical prosperity.

Our Aim

This Bible study is part of a larger project to provide biblical teaching to people living in sub-Saharan Africa. Many people in the region have heard teaching about prosperity, the so-called prosperity gospel. Its proponents claim their prosperity teaching is Christian, but in actuality it turns Christianity upside down. As John Piper has put it, “If you can boss God around, you’re God.” Instead of instructing Christians to serve God, prosperity teaching assures them that God is supposed to be their servant. At its worst, such prosperity teaching is hardly distinguishable from non-Christian efforts to manipulate spiritual power for their benefit.

The biblical stories and passages that we have chosen for *The Pearl of Great Worth* describe God as he reveals himself in the Bible. They also explain the nature of true biblical prosperity as revealed in God’s dealings with individuals and groups in the Bible. This set of Bible stories and passages does not say everything that could be said about true prosperity and true Christianity, but it points to key biblical passages about the Christian gospel and true prosperity. For a more detailed analysis of the

prosperity gospel from a Scriptural standpoint, see *The Abandoned Gospel*.¹

Why This Approach?

These Bible studies focus on narrative passages of Scripture. Why? Narrative is an influential form of communication everywhere, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Most Africans live in oral cultures; they live largely by what Professor Ernst Wendland has called “retained orality.” By that, he means that although they have learned by both school and home methods, many Africans have not let the standards of written discourse become the measure of effective communication. At heart they remain oral communicators. Whether they are uneducated, moderately educated, or graduates of prestigious universities, they treasure traditional oral art forms and African methods of learning. They enjoy well-told stories. They like to discuss stories and trade proverbs in good-natured arguments. These discussions shape Africans’ thinking, values, and behavior because they are more likely to believe someone they know and trust than a book written by a stranger. The team who put this set of Bible stories together includes African pastors and church leaders. They have seen the effectiveness of using biblical narratives plus skillfully-facilitated discussion. This combination has proven effective in dozens of language and cultural groups across sub-Saharan Africa.

The Bible is fundamentally a single narrative composed of hundreds of episodes. Biblical narratives comprise about half of the Bible. God knows how to communicate with people, so we take seriously his decision to provide humanity with stories. People remember a story far longer than they remember an outline or a list of teachings.

The teaching approach we recommend springs from the conviction that the Scriptures are inspired and powerful. They will instruct any-

one who listens to them with a teachable spirit. Thus, we encourage participants to learn each Bible story well, well enough that they can tell it faithfully to someone outside of the group. By internalizing the Bible story and telling it to others, participants gain insight into the story itself, the character of God, and human behavior.

Why These Passages?

These Bible passages and Bible stories have been carefully chosen. This is not a collection of the Bible’s “greatest hits.” It is not a list of the most famous stories of the Bible. These Bible stories are not necessarily the favorite Bible stories of the team who created this guide. Instead, these Bible stories and passages were chosen, first, to work as a unit to convey the central message of the Bible while, second, bringing out key biblical principles that speak to the needs of people and identify the errors of the prosperity movement.

Third, this set of stories sketches the basic plot of the overarching narrative of the Bible. Long experience has shown the value of situating individual Bible stories in a larger story that begins with creation and the first sin and then moves through God’s dealings with ancient Israel; the life, teachings, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; and on into the book of Acts and the epistles, where we see the people of God living as the church. Linkages between stories are important; so is the continuity of certain themes and emphases. This set of Bible stories is designed to communicate central truths repeatedly in different stories at different times in the larger narrative. This practice of returning to topics repeatedly in the lives of different biblical characters has been proven to be an effective way of bringing about change in belief and behavior. The human brain builds up belief in part through seeing the same events take place repeatedly or the same principles at work in a variety of different events.

¹ Phillip W. Barnes, et al., eds., *The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Africa: AB316, 2021).

Those of us who have put together this selection of Bible stories know that as we use a set of Bible stories, we become aware that certain Bible stories do not communicate as well with specific audiences. We therefore encourage pastors and Bible teachers to replace those stories with other biblical stories that make the same point while communicating more effectively to their specific audience.

Why This Story Length?

When you read the example Bible stories in this guide, you may notice that several of them are shorter than the original stories in the Bible. This is intentional. The purpose is for the listener to process a Bible story and then be able to retell it accurately anywhere and anytime. A shorter story is easier to remember and retell. Repeatedly telling a story reinforces the brain's grasp of the story. Having the biblical narrative in our long-term memory increases its transforming impact on our lives.

Our team of pastors and church leaders has worked hard to make sure that when a Bible story is shortened, nothing essential to the story is left out. They have sought to make sure that the primary message of the story is retained and the biblical author's intended purpose is maintained. These told stories should not be considered a substitute for the full version that is found in the Bible. In fact, time and again people who have heard a biblical story told accurately, naturally, and in a way that engages adults have quickly turned to the Bible itself to see if what they have just heard is true to Scripture. The told story stimulated their desire to listen to audio recordings of the Bible or to read the Bible and study it carefully. That is our hope for *The Pearl of Great Worth*, namely, that it will prompt Christians and non-Christians to seek to understand the teachings of the Bible better, and that the stories of the Scripture will permanently shape their lives.

Using the Notes

You can easily use the example stories in this resource to learn and to begin telling the Bible stories in your local language. Skilled African Bible storytellers have told these stories many times. Their insights into how to tell these stories effectively in context have been incorporated into the example stories. These example stories can certainly be used on their own. In other words, take them and use them.

But you will find much more in this guide. The story notes and material provide more background information. As you learn more about the context of the story, your confidence will grow as you share the example story. The more confident you are, the better storyteller you will be. You will "own" the story faster. The background information also prepares you to lead the discussion of the story. Members of the group may ask about some cultural practice in the time of the Bible. The notes will help you answer these questions that relate to the stories.

Below each story, you will find notes under the following headings:

The Story – The example story is crafted for an evangelical church attender and their non-churched friends and family.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit – This section links the example story to a particular theme that prosperity proponents or practitioners of the word of faith movement endorse. This section includes documented practices and teachings from internationally known promoters of these practices.

Biblical Cohesion (How the stories connect) – The Bible is a unified story composed of hundreds of narratives and other literary genres that describe the creation, the fall of humankind, God's plan for redemption, and ultimately the restoration when Jesus Christ returns. This story connection segment shows the links between

the stories in this set of thirty-five stories. It is not a comprehensive list but a good sample of the biblical cohesion within the stories.

Discourse (How the stories work) – We have provided details about our word choices and explanations of how these choices are used in the example story. This section is carefully documented to show scholarship from internationally recognized theological scholars and linguists to help the modern audience understand phrases, words, and context that the original audience understood easily. The information here helps the reader and storyteller share the story confidently or perhaps helps them choose a term in the local language that will bring clarity to their listeners.

Background (Historical and Biblical) – We have provided information to describe the context in which the story takes place.

Characters – We have listed the characters for each story and provided background information for new characters in the overarching series.

Key Terms – We have defined new terms that appear in each story unit. Unfamiliar terms can be misunderstood or used incorrectly, or they can bring about bias that will negatively influence openness to the good news. To curb miscommunication, we have contextualized the key terms so that a wider audience can easily understand what the words mean.

Bibliography – We recognize that we have learned much from numerous scholarly works and other resources, and we want to credit our sources. We hope the bibliographies at the end of each story guide will inspire future study.

Leading a Bible Storying Session

Preparing to Tell the Story

When preparing to lead a Bible storying session, you should internalize the story ahead of time. That does not mean memorizing the story word for word, but letting the story take residence in your memory. Some storytellers read the sto-

ry repeatedly in the Bible, using the available translations. Those translations may be in a heart language, a language of wider communication, and an international language. So Kenyans may read it in their heart language, in Swahili, and in English, for example. They may read Bibles with different translation aims, such as a more precise version that uses technical vocabulary and a more readable version that uses simpler vocabulary. Others listen to an audio recording of it several times. Still others listen as a friend tells the story to them. They then practice telling it to each other until they can tell it accurately and naturally. Other Bible storytellers find it helpful to sketch out the sequence of the story like panels in a comic book. Still others like to create a drama, acting out the story while someone narrates the story. Some orality practitioners will stop the action during the drama and ask the actors to discuss the emotions their characters are feeling.

Other Bible storytellers picture the Bible story as a movie playing in their minds. Once people have a mental picture of what happened in the story, they find it much easier to remember the story when it is time to tell it. Many Bible storytellers use several of these methods to embed the story firmly in their minds.

Having a mental picture of the story makes it easier to tell. But the storyteller will need to decide what vocabulary and storytelling style to use. Stories are more engaging and memorable when they are natural, genuine storytelling. Because spoken style is often different from written style, storytellers usually find that they need to rephrase the biblical text. *The Pearl of Great Worth* provides a suggested way to tell each of the biblical narratives.

African Christians who are skillful biblical storytellers have crafted each story to speak to an audience composed of ordinary Africans who may not know biblical terminology. As a result, many of the key terms are more contextualized. For example, "Pharaoh" is replaced with the phrase "King of Egypt." (Do not fall for the temptation of thinking everyone knows who Pharaoh is.) The

twelve apostles are called “Jesus’s twelve closest followers” or simply “closest followers.” Why do we do this? Everything is about our intended audience. We do not assume that even our most loyal church members actually know the true definitions of “church words.” While our primary audience is the church, we intentionally contextualize terms so church members can share the stories with their families, friends, and neighbors who are not Christian believers. In the story crafting process, practitioners discuss key biblical terms in context and decide what wording to use when the story is told. The story notes in the pages that follow explain several of these choices for each story. We have given you the information to help you choose clear and appropriate terminology for the same reason we have shortened the longer biblical narratives: to make it easier for people to learn the stories well enough to tell them accurately and confidently wherever they have the opportunity.

If you will be telling the story as a cultural outsider, invite a cultural insider to coach you on how to tell the story using an appropriate local storytelling style for treasured true stories. Incorporate those suggestions into your practice. Along the way, it is important to rehearse the story aloud several times. Do not just run it through your head silently. Say the words aloud the way you plan to do it with your audience. (If you practice it with members of your family, that is good, but remember that these stories are intended to engage an adult audience. Tell them that way.) The repeated practice will enable you to remember the words more easily when you tell the story to others. Be sure to practice telling the story accurately. Do not embellish the story with details that are not given in Scripture.

Review the materials so that you know what key points we hope the participants will grasp from the story you plan to tell. Bible stories are rich with insights and truth, so you may need to help the group focus on the key biblical truths that are important for this topic.

Leading the Session

Through years of leading storytelling sessions, we have learned that the ordered activities in the list below help to remove barriers and to foster a learning environment that promotes the application of God’s word and the multiplication of disciples throughout and even beyond local communities. We highly recommend that you use this list to help you present the Bible stories:

1. Give an appropriate cultural greeting as people arrive for the Bible storying session. Ask how things are going in their lives and listen to their answers. Mentally note how the Bible story you plan to tell may intersect the recent events in their lives.
2. Ask the participants how it went when they shared the story from the previous session with their families, friends, and neighbors. Ask how it went rather than if they told someone. In this way and others, create the expectation that everyone will learn and tell every story. Be sure there is time in the overall session for accountability and the encouragement it will bring. Ask if someone will volunteer to retell the previous story. If no one volunteers, retell it yourself.
3. Remind the group of any key insights from the previous story or earlier Bible stories in this series that have a bearing on the new story you are about to tell.
4. Provide as briefly as possible any essential background information that people will need in order to understand the Bible story you are about to tell.
5. Tell the story in an accurate and natural way. Use the storytelling style that the culture uses for engaging adults with true stories about actual events that it considers important. Good storytelling often involves varying the pace at which you tell the story, the volume and intensity of your voice, and your physical movement and gestures. Let your enthusiasm for the story come through, but also remember to match your emotional state to the content of the story. In the same way, be sure

your facial expression is appropriate for what is taking place at different points in the story.

6. When you finish telling the Bible story, simply stop. Pause, and say, "That is the true story of _____ from God's word."
7. In some cultures, there is considerable value in pausing in silence for ten to fifteen seconds (or longer) after the story ends to let the story soak in. Observe the response from your group as to whether to shorten or lengthen the soak-in period.
8. Then lead the group or individual to review the story to reinforce it. This review can take several forms.
 - a. The best practice is to retell the entire story a second time immediately—before beginning to discuss it.
 - b. After the retelling, begin a conversation with the group: "How did the story begin?" When they answer correctly, ask, "What happened next?" As they answer, keep asking, "What happened next?" until the participants have collectively stated the actions and words of the story in the correct sequence.
 - c. You may ask, "Which one of you would like to retell the story to the group? If you get stuck, we will help you." This works better when the story is not too hard, and the participants are not afraid of embarrassing themselves. If no one volunteers, move ahead with the discussion and ask again later in the session for someone to retell it. Once they have heard the story discussed in detail, usually someone will be willing to retell it. Oral preference learners will meditate on and process the story content better having heard it multiple times. That is especially true when a cultural outsider is leading the session.
 - d. One of the most effective learning activities is to have the group act out the Bible story while the facilitator narrates the story. Some storying practitioners will stop

the action during the drama to discuss the emotions the characters are feeling. In Scripture resource development, the action is stopped to discuss key biblical terms in context. Some facilitators have the group act out the story more than once. The first time, the group acts out the story using words, and the second time without words.

- e. The facilitator then uses questions to prompt the group to think carefully about the story and recognize the truths that the story conveys. The facilitator should not explain the story to the group or use this as an occasion to preach to the group. Instead, the facilitator guides the participants' attention to various facets of the biblical narrative and prompts discussion within the group. **Ask the following questions:**
 - i. What do you like about this story?
 - ii. What do you find difficult to accept about this story?
 - iii. What does this story show you about God?
 - iv. What does this story show you about people?
 - v. If this story is true, how does it affect your life, behavior, or attitudes?
 - vi. Who will you tell it to? ("My spouse, my family" is an automatic answer, so ask, "Who besides your spouse and children will you tell it to?")

The facilitator is not limited to these six questions. But experience has shown that beginners who are learning to lead a Bible storying session do better with a short list of discussion questions that they can use with every story. Many participants are better able to relax, concentrate, and participate once they realize that the sessions follow the same pattern each time, including asking these same key questions.

The series of six questions as well as the approach of the planned session are designed to be used in informal conversations as well. The questions are designed to be reproducible and readily adapted for the local context with family, friends, neighbors, and secular coworkers.

The sequence of these questions is purposeful. The first question is not a question about the facts of the story. It is a "safe" question because there is no right or wrong answer. If a group is uneasy about answering questions, this one and the second one can build their confidence, especially if the facilitator makes appropriate, encouraging remarks. Answers to the first two questions often provide insights into the cultural background and values of the participants. The third question is crucial. Understanding God the Father (and/or God the Son in the stories about Jesus) is a primary purpose of Scripture and any study of Scripture. Wrong understandings of God lead to errors in beliefs, values, behavior, and emotions. The fourth question, about what the story teaches about people, and what people are like in relationship to God and to others, leads ever closer to applying the story to life. The fifth question is an explicit question about the impact the story might have on our lives. The phrase "If this story is true," is used primarily with non-Christians. The phrase is not intended to convey any doubts about the truthfulness of the story. Instead, it attempts to prevent non-Christians from sidestepping the application question with the response that "I don't believe this story is true." Our goal is to prompt them to think through the implications of the story for themselves even if they have not yet decided whether the story is true.

The application question naturally comes last. The facilitator needs to feel confident that the participants have understood the basic content of the story before asking

them to draw application from it. In the final question, the facilitator conveys the expectation that everyone will remember the story by telling the story to others.

As the Bible storying session draws to a close, the facilitator should end the session in a way that fits the situation and the audience. That might include prayer, a teaser about the next story, and an invitation for people to stay for additional discussions. Bible stories used in this way frequently lead participants to want to talk further with the facilitator or each other. These discussions may go on for a long time, so the leader of the session should not plan to depart immediately after the formal session ends. Some of the most fruitful discussions will take place individually or in small groups at that time.

An African pastor experimented with Bible storying in his adult Sunday school class, which met before the 11:00 a.m. worship service. He followed the approach recommended in this guide. Later he commented that the adults in the class were far more engaged than usual. One man who usually dozed off was wide awake and listening carefully. Others who normally sat silently spoke up, asking questions and answering the pastor's questions. Class members were so eager to retell the story or answer questions that the pastor had to limit some people so that others could speak. The main drawback to the Bible storying method, the pastor concluded, is that the participants were so engrossed in discussing the Scripture that they did not want to leave the Sunday school class to go to the worship service on time. What a good problem to have!

Our prayer is that you likewise will see people in your church and community earnestly engaged in the study of biblical narratives, and that they will discover who God is and experience the true biblical prosperity that he offers to all who follow Jesus as their Savior. Jesus is the pearl of great worth.

Story Guide 1

Creation of the Spirit World

*Genesis 1:1; Colossians 1:16; Psalm 103:20-22; Matthew 1:20; Acts 10:3; Hebrews 1:6**

In the beginning, God created everything—the sky, the earth. He created everything we can see and everything we cannot see. He made spirit-beings called angels to worship him, serve him, and take messages for him. Everything God created was good!

One of the leaders of the angels rebelled against God, and he persuaded other angels to rebel with him. Now these angels who rebelled are called evil spirits or demons. Their leader is called Satan, and the evil spirits serve him.

Satan and his spirits roam the earth to accuse people, deceive people, and persuade them to disobey God.

Beware! Sometimes Satan even disguises himself as an angel of light.

The evil spirits know that even now, God is more powerful than they are.

And, God has a plan for Satan and his spirits. The evil spirits know that they do not have much time, so they act in anger on the earth.

God has made a roaring fire that never ends for Satan and his evil spirits, and one day, at the end of this world, he will throw Satan and his spirits into the lake made of fire—what we call hell—where they will burn forever.

All their evil works will be destroyed forever!

And we rejoice, because our God is most powerful!

*See all Scripture references on p. 22

Here is the story again with the Scripture references included so you can see how the story was crafted from the biblical text:

In the beginning, God created everything—the sky, the earth (**Gen 1:1**). He created everything we can see and everything we cannot see (**Col 1:16**). He made spirit-beings called angels to worship him, serve him, and to take messages for him (**Ps 103:20-22, Matt 1:20; Acts 10:3; Heb 1:6**). Everything God created was good!

One of the leaders of the angels rebelled against God, and he persuaded other angels to rebel with him. Now these angels who rebelled are called evil spirits or demons. Their leader is called Satan, and the evil spirits serve him (**Matt 9:34; 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 12:7-10**).

Satan and his spirits roam the earth in order to accuse people, deceive people, and persuade them to disobey God (**Job 1:7-12; John 8:44; 1 Tim 4:1; Gen 3:1-4; 2 Cor 4:4; Zech 3:1-4; Rev 12:10; Eph 6:11, 12**).

Beware! Sometimes Satan even disguises himself as an angel of light (**2 Cor 11:14**).

The evil spirits know that even now, God is more powerful than they are.

And, God has a plan for Satan and his spirits (**Mark 1:23-26; 5:7-13; 6:7**). The evil spirits know that they do not have much time, so they act in anger on the earth (**Rev 12:12-17**).

God has made a roaring fire that never ends for Satan and his evil spirits, and one day, at the end of this world, he will throw Satan and his spirits into the lake made of fire—what we call hell—where they will burn forever (**Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10**).

All their evil works will be destroyed forever! (**1 John 3:8**)

And we rejoice, because our God is most powerful! (**Rev 12:10-12; 20-22**)

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Your Best Life Now
8 Steps to the Life You Want
The Winning Wisdom
Satan Get Lost
250 Powerful Night Prayers for Financial Blessings and Miracles
The Laws of Prosperity
"Unlocking Your Closed Destiny"

These bestselling books and sermons represent a few of the interesting titles available in the self-help and religious study sections of bookstores and the digital marketplace. At first glance, their tempting titles appeal to most everyone's desire to improve their lives and the lives of their family members. Who does not want better for their family? After all, the teaching from these books is often punctuated with a Scripture verse reference. If there is a Scripture verse, then it must be good and sanctioned by God, right?

This kind of teaching is readily available. Social media and religious prophetic television stations declare that deliverance, power, wealth, success, breakthrough, and perfect health can be ours. Millions of dollars, nairas, rands, cedi, kwachas, CFA francs, and pounds are exchanged yearly in the pursuit of tapping into God's power and divine secrets via the ministry of prosperity and word of faith teachers.

Upon closer examination, the prosperity and word of faith proponents promote a contractual agreement with God that is little more than camouflaged animism. Animists believe they can attempt to foretell future events, discover hidden knowledge, or manipulate the spirits or the 'universe' for their purposes. "Animism is a power religion based upon manipulation and coercion of spiritual powers," writes missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen. "While prayerful supplication affects [God's] working," Van Rheenen continues, "divination implies a desire to force deity, ... a disbelief in God's sovereignty. It is an attempt to manipulate the spiritual forces of God's world to learn its secrets and manipulate

them for personal benefit. These motivations, based on greedy self-benefit, are alien to the mind of God. While the Christian way is relational, the animistic way is manipulative."¹

The prosperity gospel, an American export with these characteristics of animism, has rapidly spread around the world. It is flourishing in Africa. It has a death grip on the evangelical church in Africa.

The Pearl of Great Worth set of Bible stories teaches how God provides true prosperity, and it helps learners recognize the pitfalls that await people who pursue prosperity using the ways of the world.

From the beginning, God and his created beings have had conflict over this issue. Will his creatures serve God or themselves? Will they seek his pleasure or their own? That conflict began with the spirit world, which is a pervasive and powerful element in a sub-Saharan African context.

Many Christian leaders and pastors grasp how important it is to teach Scripture faithfully in a culturally relevant way, especially about the spirit world. A Baptist leader has written, "Critical contextualization stands as the primary missiological issue in the evolution of Baptists."² The same is true for other Christian groups. For this reason, we begin with a story about God's activity in creating the spirit world. This story intentionally does not focus on the spirits. Instead, it highlights God's sovereignty, power, and ultimate victory.

This story is very useful in cultures where people place a high value on the spiritual world, or where people do not understand where evil comes from. Used successfully in Muslim, Hindu, and animistic cultures, this story unpacks how the spirit world developed. It explains how good is separated from evil. Many cultures do not differentiate between good and evil spirits, and many cultures do not understand that Satan

¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Defining an Animistic Worldview*, March 14, 2011, <http://missiology.com/blog/GVR-Defining-an-Animistic-Worldview>.

² Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, MO: CreateSpace, 2017), 143.

is the enemy of God and is not to be feared or worshiped. All things that God creates are good. Satan and the other angels who chose to rebel are now fallen and cursed enemies of God. In this state, Satan has a specific strategy on this earth. God is more powerful than Satan, both now and in the future. This story also highlights that God has plans and will be ultimately victorious over Satan.

It is the age-old problem literally from the beginning of time—trying to manipulate God/gods for one's own benefit. When prosperity proponents search for the formula, phraseologies, and rituals that demand God/gods to do

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the World – Both the seen and the unseen share a cohesive origin. All that God created was good and was meant to live in harmony with the Creator God.

Capture of the Sacred Chest – Israel abandoned the covenant relationship with Yahweh. Israel worshiped the local Canaanite idols and attempted to use the ark of the covenant as a magical relic. Scripture interprets these demons and idols as the same spirits (*Deut 32:16-17; Lev 17:7*).

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal – Elijah confronted Israel's king, who led the nation to continue in idol worship.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned – Evil spirits continued to work on the earth. Simon was interested more in the manipulation of the spirits for personal profit than in the Holy Spirit for righteous edification.

Warning: False Teachers – False teachers imitated in part the true and holy. Evil was a part of the false teaching meant to deceive and turn people away from the truth of the gospel.

their bidding, they teeter on the verge of the syncretic practice of animism. In fact, they often cross over into practices that have more in common with ATR (African Traditional Religion) than with the Bible.

Missiologist Paul G. Hiebert writes:

All societies seek prosperity, whether in the form of offspring, good crops, success in love, or special power. And all face crises of illness, death, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and the like. Every society also has common folk knowledge to deal with these problems. But what happens when human knowledge fails? At that time many people turn to religious or magical rites for answers. In Guinea in West Africa, for example, young women offer carved dolls of women suckling children to a fetish in order to assure pregnancy, while young men fire guns and brandish swords to drive away demons.³

Religious and magical rites are imitations of what it means to be truly prosperous. To understand the imitation, we will study the original prosperity—what Scripture teaches on true prosperity.

Supernatural forces are a very real concern in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world. **The Creation of the Spirit World** story reveals how spiritual beings were created, their purpose, their limitations, and ultimately their damnation. This story sets the stage for the whole story set. The truths in this story will be interwoven throughout the series of stories as displays of the supernatural unfold.

³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 182.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Crafting note: *As a composite narrative or composite story, the story relies on different references that remain faithful to the context of the overarching biblical teaching of evil spirits and Satan to tell this single story. This form of story crafting is an exception to the rule—not being drawn from one specific narrative or author.*

We do not know exactly when Satan and his followers rebelled against God or were thrown out of heaven. The only time references we can be sure of are in the telling of the creation of the world at the beginning of time, and the ultimate destruction of evil spirits at the end of the present world. Be sure you do not give specific time frames where there are none.

Transition words are very important in the telling of this story, as it can be difficult to follow and retell because of the necessary ambiguity of the narrative. It is best to keep this story short so that it remains easy to retell.

Background Information

Biblical

Spirit-beings and all things unseen were created by God. Colossians 1:16 makes that clear.

The Psalms, Matthew, Acts, and Hebrews passages in the first section each indicate aspects of angels' characteristics and purposes that we have listed in the story.

Many individual verses indicate that Satan has helpers—his evil spirits. We know that Satan rebelled against God, and that his spirits followed him and serve him. Sometimes passages in Ezekiel and Isaiah are used to create a story about what happened when Satan rebelled.

However, scholars disagree on whether these passages actually refer to Satan, so we have chosen not to use them to craft this story.⁴

Biblical scholars are unclear whether Satan and his followers have already been thrown out of heaven completely, or if they still have some access to heaven. It would seem, from evidence such as the Job story, that they still had some access to heaven. Revelation 12 is believed by many scholars to describe when Satan is officially expelled from heaven and his ultimate defeat begins. Scholars believe the woman represents the faithful community that existed both before and after Jesus. (The imagery of the woman comes from several OT passages.) Revelation 12:7–10 may indicate that when Jesus died and was resurrected, Satan lost his place as accuser in heaven. Revelation 12:10 describes that Satan's expulsion from heaven inaugurates Jesus's kingdom. Now Satan and his demons continue their attack on men, but with more fierceness because they know that their time is limited (Rev 12:12).

While there are many verses that describe the actions of Satan, we have confined the list to just a few. This is intentional to keep the story short and easy to retell.

We included 2 Cor 11:14 to help the audience understand that even something they have always considered to be good could be evil if it is against God.

Revelation 12:12–17 and the Mark passages point out the current activity of evil spirits on this earth. We want the audience to understand that not only does God have ultimate victory, but he has victory even now. The Matt 25 and Rev 20 passages show that God will have ultimate victory.

The last line of the story is a needed victorious reminder that we serve the all-powerful God!

⁴ LaMar Eugene Cooper, *New American Commentary Volume 17 - Ezekiel* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 265.

In this story, we have chosen to state only the things we are sure of—that Satan rebelled and took some followers with him, that they roam the earth today with the goal to deceive people, and one day they will be thrown into an eternal lake of fire that God has prepared for them.

Characters

God

Angels

Satan

Evil Spirits

Angels

If you have a Bible translation, your best option would be to use the word in the translation, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you don't have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original word. An "angel" is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form, they are inferior to Jesus, and they often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for "angel" that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as "messenger of/from God," "envoy of God," or perhaps "ambassador of God." Be aware, though, that "prophet" also conveys those meanings. You might have to add "spirit (messenger from God)" to this description.

Satan

Satan is the name given to the spiritual being, whom God created, who is the leader of the evil spiritual beings who decided to rebel against God.

Evil spirits

We know from the Bible that all things, including spirits, were created by God and were

good. Certain spirits chose to disobey God and are now deemed as evil spirits. They are spiritual beings who serve Satan as his agents, being under his authority. These spiritual beings have the power to oppress a human being and even take control of him. Try to choose a word that refers to an independent spirit-being that is evil and opposed to God. If there is one, you can also use a neutral word for an independent spirit-being and add a qualification like "spirit from Satan," or "bad/evil spirit." Be aware that extra explanation might be necessary during the discussion time.

Key Terms

Worship

Worship's foundation is the idea of service, shown through showing awe and wonder to God.⁵ Different cultures and languages have different words for worship, some of which refer only to certain ceremonies or rituals one must do. In this story, it implies more than just performing rituals. It includes the worshiper's heart of awe and wonder for God. Be sure that the word or combination of words you choose for worship includes this idea.

Eternal means something that has no beginning in the past and that never ends.

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter's Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, "Worship," in *New Bible Dictionary*, Derek R. W. Wood, et al., eds., 3rd ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1250.

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Story Guide 2

Creation of the World

Genesis 1:1-31; 2:2-3, 7-9, 15-25

In the beginning there was God. He spoke, and when he did, he created the universe, the whole world, and everything in it. God spoke and made light and water. He spoke and made the dry ground and all kinds of plants and trees. God spoke and made the sun, the moon, and the stars. He spoke and made all kinds of fish, birds, and animals. And then, God created man and woman. He patterned them after himself. God looked at all he had created and said, "It is good."

God formed a man's body from the soil of the ground and breathed into him, and he began to live. Then God placed the man in a garden of fruit trees. In this garden were trees that produced delicious fruit. At the center of the garden were two trees—the tree that gave life and the tree that gave the understanding of good and evil. But God told the man, Adam, "You may eat any fruit in the garden except the fruit from the tree that gives the understanding of good and evil. If you eat this tree's fruit, you will die."

And God said, "It is not good for Man to be alone." So God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. He took one of Adam's ribs and made a woman from the rib and brought her to Adam. "At last!" Adam exclaimed. "She has flesh and bones like me!" Adam and his wife, Eve, were naked, but they were not ashamed.

God blessed them and told them, "Multiply and be masters over the fish and birds and all the animals." Then God looked over all he had made, and said, "It is very good." God had created the world and everything in it in six days.

The next day, the seventh day, God stopped working. God set apart one day of the week for himself because he had finished creating the world.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The Genesis account of creation sets Israel's creation story apart from the creation stories of the surrounding ancient cultures. God spoke the world into existence in a way that sets him apart from his created order—he is definitely above and separate from it. God does not just provide order out of chaos, but wills creation into being. In comparison with ancient creation myths, God's naming of elements of creation shows his authority; so does the six days-plus-one structure of ordered creation. Perhaps most importantly for our purposes, the biblical account links creation to the inauguration of human history in a way that no other accounts do. God has a plan for his creation from the very beginning (Gen 2:4).

God created everything, so he is the owner. God made Adam and Eve and gave them their food and a place to live. God instructed them to tend and watch over the garden. Their contentment was found in their peaceful daily fellowship with God. God provided for all their needs.

Fundamental to the prosperity gospel is the "word of faith" doctrine. As the name suggests, proponents proudly teach that one can create wealth, prosperity, and perfect health by speaking words as God did in the creation account. America's wealthiest pastor,¹ Kenneth Copeland, says in his sermon the "The Law of Words," "Every time we confess the Word of God from a heart that's confident God will do in our lives what he said—according to Jesus in Mark 11:24—we shall have what we say."² That is not true. God alone holds the power to create with the power of his words. Copeland and like-minded teachers resemble idol worshipers who want to "be like God." They seek to control God for their benefit rather than worship God and serve his purposes.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – Scholars disagree on the timeline of the creation narratives, but both are important origin accounts.

God Chose Abraham – God continued to pursue a relationship with humankind and created a special people for himself. God set apart Abraham and his descendants for this unique relationship.

Joseph the Servant Leader – God continued to preserve his special people he created for himself.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – Moses pled with God on behalf of the Israelites that God's presence would continue with them to the promised land. God's presence set apart his people from all others.

Birth of Jesus – As in the beginning of creation, God lived among his people.

Suffering is Finished – The creation of the world will come to full fruition. Jesus will speak and destroy the enemy. The tree of life will be available to all. God will live among his people again.

¹ Jay Root, "Kenneth Copeland is the Wealthiest Pastor in America. So why does he live in a tax-free Texas mansion?" *Houston Chronicle*, December 15, 2021, [https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/unfair-burden/article/kenneth-copeland-wealth-pastor-tax-free-mansion-16662283.phputm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20\(Premium\)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/unfair-burden/article/kenneth-copeland-wealth-pastor-tax-free-mansion-16662283.phputm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20(Premium)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral).

² Kenneth Copeland, "The 7 Laws of Prosperity," May 2, 2019, <https://blog.kcm.org/the-7-laws-of-prosperity>, video file.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Genesis 1:1-2:3 is an organized, tightly constructed, God-centered discourse. God is the subject of the action and is the focus, rather than the creation that he made. This passage serves as an introduction to Israel's God—he is the one who created the universe.

In many languages, "in the beginning" denotes a specific opening to a specific type of story. Be sure that your introduction to this story indicates the beginning of a true, historical story. "In the beginning," suggested that there is an end. Therefore, the New Testament writers spoke of the end in terms of the beginning (i.e., "new heaven and new earth").

The first sentence of Genesis traditionally is translated something like "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," which has been widely debated as either being an independent clause or a dependent clause that would more accurately be translated "When God began creating the heavens and the earth." The former assumes that God pre-existed before all matter, while the latter leaves open the possibility that chaos existed without intervention from God before the world was created. Most scholars (and most English Bible translations) have chosen the former interpretation (the first sentence being an independent clause), based on its discourse consistency with the rest of the chapter.

The phrase "the heavens and the earth" implied a totality of the universe.

The account of nature's creation has been summarized from Gen 1. Most of the story has come directly from Gen 2, the more narrative account of creation that focuses on aspects of creation from Gen 1. The Gen 2 account moves on further into creation—into the beginning of humankind's story and indicates to us that the reason for creation is humankind's history. Many previous attempts at reconstructing the day-by-day creation structure of Gen 1 in a nat-

ural, well-told story form have failed. Instead, we have chosen to highlight the fact that God spoke in order to create. This, in turn, highlights God's more hands-on creation of people and showcases the differences between people and the rest of God's creation. In the example English story, we have made the shift from the general created order to the creation of humankind by our use of the discourse feature "And then." Similar to the discourse shift in the text in Gen 2:4, "And then" signals a turn of events.

God spoke, "and when he did, he created." This is the way we have rendered "Then God said, 'Let there be...!' (NLT). The English translation "let there be" seems to imply that God permitted something to happen, rather than the fact that he commanded something to happen. However, when God spoke, he was not asking an agent to carry out his commands, but rather commanding the thing to come into being. Some translations have rendered this idea as something like (1) "God (spoke and) commanded light to appear, or (2) Light! Appear!"

The order of creation is maintained in this story without chronology words so that in the retelling of this story it is not necessary to retell the order of creation as it happened. For the purposes of this story, it is probably not necessary to communicate the chronology perfectly; however, look at the indigenous creation accounts from your culture before making a final decision.

Teaching Tool: *Another way to look at the chronology of the creation is to consider the first three days as the preparation of the earth to be inhabited, and then the last three days as the "filling up" of earth and sky with the created things. So the sky, ground, oceans, and vegetation were all prepared for the arrival of the sun, moon, and stars to fill the sky, the birds and fish to fill the sky and water, and the animals and people to fill the ground.*

By avoiding the translation "let us make," this story avoids the issues surrounding the plu-

ral “us.” Introducing this issue in one of the first stories in a story set may not be worth the confusion or the distraction from the creation account that it might cause. If your story crafting teams want to include the first person plural, we suggest that you read the full *UBS Handbook* (Gen 1:26) explanation, which explains that most modern interpreters prefer to explain this grammatical structure as a plural of deliberation, used to mark when God is making a significant decision.

The creation of humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation, as shown in the discourse features of the original narrative: Creation occurred in ascending order, with humans being the final creation. The creation of man is the only creation that is preceded with the deliberative comment “Let us make” (NLT) instead of the neutral “Let there be.” More narration is given to the creation of man, and the language is that God directly creates man, rather than the indirect “let the earth produce.” Humans are the only creation to whom God speaks directly and blesses. Genesis 1:27 makes it clear that humans are created both male and female and that they are created in God’s image. Be sure that in your story, whether by the words (discourse markers) or by the storytelling devices you use (pauses, emphasis, etc.), your audience recognizes this.

Adam is not a personal name explicitly given by God. In fact, the Hebrew word used here has the general meaning of man when used with the article, and the more specific personal name when used without the article. It is considered unclear by biblical scholars when Adam first appeared as a personal name, so we have also left it unclear. Therefore, the man in your story can be named at any point. Many translations (e.g., TEV) choose to switch to Adam’s proper name when Eve is created. In our story we have included Adam’s name in an appositive (an aside introducing his name) in Gen 2:16.

Most commentators suggest that God created man and then planted the garden for him (this does not contradict the order of creation—this garden was a special place that God prepared for man). However, some translations (including the NIV) maintain the order of creation and say that God placed man in a garden he had already created. Your story may remain ambiguous on this chronology. The important point is that this garden was made specifically for the newly created man.

We have omitted Gen 2:10-14 from the example story because we wanted to focus on the creation of people rather than on a description of the garden.

God’s prohibition in Gen 2:16 from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is worded as a very strong command. Use a strong command word in your story.

We have omitted Gen 2:18-19 from the example story, because we want to focus on God’s creation of and relationship with humankind. However, if you include it, you will find that Gen 2:19 indicates an apparent contradiction to the order and manner of creation of animals and birds. Keep in mind that the two accounts of creation in chapters 1 and 2 were intended for different purposes and therefore focus on different aspects of creation. In any case, it is clear from both accounts that humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation.

In the example story, we have omitted Gen 2:24, in which a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife. The terminology used in this verse is reminiscent of covenantal language and certainly implies that marriage is a serious commitment. We omitted it because it seemed to distract from the main ideas we wanted to convey in this story, but you may include this in your story if it complements your theme. If you include this in your story, be sure to focus on the resultant unity rather than the physical departure from parents. The text does not imply that the man had a relational break with his family and did not refer to a specific

sociological order, but instead emphasized that he is now united with his wife.

The discourse structure of Gen 2:2-3 indicated the importance of the seventh day in God's creation. The rest that was accomplished on that day was intended to last forever (as indicated by the fact that unlike the first six days, this day does not have the refrain of "there was morning and evening"). We have indicated this importance in English by saying that God "set apart" the seventh day. Use appropriate discourse features in your language to show this importance. God finished his work of creation on the sixth day. In English, the best way to clarify this is to use the pluperfect tense "On the seventh day, God *HAD FINISHED* his work." Be sure that your audience understands from your story that God did not work on the seventh day.

"Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame" (Gen 1:25 NLT). The discourse structure of the story indicates that this is the climax of the creation story. The clue may be found in the fact that this is the only time in the Bible that nakedness is mentioned without the implication of some form of humiliation. (Contrast this example with references to poverty in Job 24:7, shame and guilt in Ezek 16:22, or birth in Job 1:21). The grammar of "they felt no shame" is reciprocal, so we could also say "they did not shame each other, or they weren't embarrassed with each other." An ongoing relationship was implied rather than a moment-in-time state of being.

The last few sentences of this story attempt to indicate the perfect harmony between nature and humankind (nature flourished under the care of Adam, its first gardener and caretaker), between humankind and God (God talked to Adam directly, had an integral part in his life, and no shame existed between them), and between male and female (no role confusion or shame existed between them). Pointing out the harmony in this story will emphasize the contrast in the next story—when the harmony is broken—more effectively.

Background Information

Historical

Many ancient cultures would not have questioned the light being created before the sun. They did not realize that light comes from the sun, because they saw light even when the sun was behind a cloud, or just before and just after the sun rose and set.

Biblical

God named the elements of creation, and this naming showed his authority to the ancient cultures that were this narrative's first audiences. If your culture would benefit from knowing that God named each element (e.g., God called the light "day" and the darkness "night"), you may state that explicitly in the story. Similarly, the man named the animals, showing his God-given dominion over them. If your audience needs to hear this, you may include it in your story.

God blessed people, and implied multiplying through procreation. Unlike the animals, God does not say to procreate "after their kind," thus elevating procreation to something more than just the multiplication of the species. Human sexuality is special and important in the created order.

The term "dominion" in Gen 1:26 and the subsequent "master" in Gen 1:28 referred to responsible care that man takes for creation. It probably implied settling the land and using it for agriculture. Not until after Noah, was this care extended to the killing of animals for food.

"It was excellent in every way" is the NLT's way of expressing "It was good." The Hebrew word for good refers to both practical and aesthetic characteristics of something. This creation account leaves no room for the thought that matter in and of itself could be evil.

It is interesting to note that the sixth day's creation is expressed in more detail than any other day, and that at the end of the day the good-

ness of the creation is qualified with a *very*. It is clear from these details that humans are considered the pinnacle of God's creation.

God had a good relationship with the first humans. The story itself seems to indicate this, but even some of the original word choices give subtle affirmation. Genesis 2:15 literally says that "God placed Adam to rest in the garden," a slightly different wording from Gen 2:8 where he simply placed Adam in the garden. This word is used in other contexts in the Old Testament to indicate rest or safety. Whatever vocabulary you choose in your story, the overall idea should be that the garden was a place of safety, rest, and relationship with God.

The man and the woman were given work to do, even in the "perfection" before the fall. God gave Adam a purpose and a job to do in caring for the garden. Work was originally a God-given task.

People are formed from a substance already created. God spoke the soil into existence, but he extended his act of creation to the action of forming the soil into a man.

In neighboring ethnic groups, divine beings (or semi-divine beings such as kings) gave life to others through blowing it into their nostrils. It would seem that God's breathing into the man (conferring his image on man and woman) places all people on an equal footing with each other and makes the Israelite account of creation unique.

The Hebrew word for "breath" used in Gen 2:7 is a word used only for God and for people. The breath of life is the breath that causes a person to live. We have clarified that in our example story.

When God prohibited Adam from eating from the tree that gave the knowledge of good and evil, he was not prohibiting him from gaining this wisdom. Instead, he was making the point that all wisdom should be gained through him

(Prov 2:1-6). Trying to gain wisdom independent of God will only lead to destruction, and that was the sin of Adam. Jesus, the second "Adam," humbled himself and became obedient, unlike the first Adam.

Literally, God told Adam that he will certainly die the day he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The warning seems clear—he will die immediately—and the verb used to indicate death is one that implies a divine or royal decree of execution.

Some have suggested that if Adam and Eve had not eaten from the tree that gives the knowledge of good and evil, they would have been immortal on the earth. However, many scholars today agree that this is not the case—Adam and Eve would have simply been taken from this earth to heaven without passing through death. The tree of life would have given a renewing of earthly life.

Genesis 2:19 shows that animals were not equal with Adam—a suitable helper for him was not found among them. Woman was created to be his counterpart—a creation also in the image of God.

"It is not good that man is alone" in Gen 2:18 is evidence that God created humans to be in relationship with each other. The continuation "I will make a helper who is just right for him" uses "help" in its widest form—in the sense of a complement or partner. If you include this phrase in your story, be sure that the word used for helper in your story does not imply "servant."

The detailed account of the fashioning of woman is unique. The Hebrews had a higher view of women than any other ancient civilization. This account should be translated in a positive light.

Adam's sleep was caused by God and was deep and unnatural in the sense that only God could wake up Adam.

Adam named Eve, an action that in the Old Testament signifies authority. The woman is made from the man. They are of the same substance and both made in the image of God. However, this narrative clearly shows that there is hierarchy in creation. Adam and Eve are also in partnership in a way that people and animals are not in that they are both given the task of ruling over the earth together.

“And the two are united into one” in Gen 2:24 has been omitted from the example story, but if you choose to include it, keep in mind that the unity described here is not yet one of pro-creation—but of body and soul. Genesis 2:24 speaks of unity and solidarity, but God has not yet commanded the first couple to populate the earth.

Most commentators favor non-literal days in their interpretation of the seven days of the creation account. It seems that a non-traditional understanding of a “day” is necessary, if for no other reason than the fact that the sun, which orders our understanding of “day” was not created until the fourth day of creation. However, the exact nature of “day” in the creation account remains ambiguous and should stay in your story.

God declared the seventh day holy (unlike the other days), or “set apart” for himself. We have unpacked the meaning of holy for the purposes of this story. This day is to be different from all the rest—in the six days of creation God worked, but on this day, he did not work. Your story should make the difference clear.

Teaching tool: *Ask one team to come up and show us what “holy” is. They may show someone praying or doing good things. Tell them that is one meaning of holy, but that there are many meanings. Ask another team to come up and show you another meaning. Eventually a team may show one person set apart from the group. Tell the teams, that is the meaning of “holy” in this story.*

Characters

God

Adam

Eve

Tree that gives knowledge of good and evil
Tree that gives life (for the purposes of visualizing the story)

Key Terms

Create

In the Bible, God is always the subject of the verb *create*. The word implies new activity or a renewal/restoration, and it never refers to the substance from which something was created. Therefore, it implies *creatio ex nihilo*, or “creation out of nothing.” The related word often translated “to make” or “to do” can have as its subject either a human or God but implies making something from pre-existing material. These two words (make and create) are used interchangeably in the creation narrative and do not necessarily mean that they should be translated differently in each case. However, the overall idea of this passage is that at the beginning God created out of nothing, as evidenced in Gen 1:1, where the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* is unparalleled in any other ancient creation narrative.

Bless

This refers to when God helps, does good to, or favors someone or something. In the Creation and Abraham stories, the specific blessing included God giving them the ability to reproduce and multiply. This term comes with the notion of proliferation and success and indicates the existence of a relationship between the person giving the blessing and the person being blessed.

Patterned after himself (image of God)

The Hebrew word for image (*selem*) is used in the Old Testament in several different contexts, sometimes referring to a representation of something else (1 Sam 6:5, 11), an unsubstan-

tial reality such as a dream (Ps 73:20), or most commonly as an idolatrous image (Num 33:52, 2 Kgs 11:18). In neighboring ethnic groups, the king or a high-ranking official was considered to be “in the image of God,” but a lowly worker wasn’t. This phrase in Genesis may be a way of saying that all people are in fact royal, true children of God. This idea of sonship is further suggested in Gen 5, when the comment that God created people in his image is immediately followed by Adam’s genealogy. It’s clear from this passage and others (see 1 Cor 11:7) that the image continues even after the disobedience in Gen 3. In any case, we should not focus solely on one aspect of humankind (e.g., the physical, relational, etc.) when we speak of image. A person is a complete unit, and it’s no one part of him that is made in “God’s image.”

“Likeness” has also been associated with theophany in the Old Testament. (Ezekiel uses this imagery throughout his writing.) Some commentators have suggested that the use of “image” and “likeness” in the Gen 1 account basically suggests the presence of God (theophany)—not that humankind has the properties of God, but that it represents his presence as his appointed ruler over earth. Humans can represent God because we contain his “essence,” or a conscience, spiritual discernment, and self-awareness.³

What we do know is that “image” refers to some sort of resemblance, probably in some form both physical and spiritual. Our story’s interpretation of “image of God” should not say more than the text states, so it should also remain ambiguous. TEV translates this as “They will be like us and resemble us.”

Teaching tool: *Use a photograph to talk about image. To make sure that the group does not think too much about appearance, ask about why we would carry a photo of our friend, wife, or mother. Is it to remember what they look like*

or to remember things about them and their character?

Form

The Hebrew word translated “formed” in Gen 2:7 is used elsewhere to refer to the actions of a potter; a potter works with the soil as well. It means to shape, mold, or fashion. God takes great care to “form” the man and “build” the woman.

Dust

The dust God used to form man may be the loose surface dirt on the ground, or something that is pulverized. You may even simply say that it is soil, dirt, or lumps of earth. In any case, it is connected with the fact that man will return to dust when he dies, and that man will have to till the earth.

We rendered “living being” as “and he began to live.” The word used for “living being” in the text refers to the life force of humans, that force that is closely tied with the physical aspects of life such as breath.

“Garden” in this context referred to a garden that contains not only food, but flowers, trees, and shrubs. Your word should be something that can refer to a large area of cultivated land where trees also grow. However, in some cultures, garden only refers to vegetables. In that case, you may use a more general description like “a good place made specifically for the man to live.” Be sure that your word does not connote “paradise,” because that concept carries with it unwanted connotations.

Tree of life

Eating the fruit from this tree gives a person life that lasts forever (Gen 3:22). You may call this tree something like “the tree whose fruit causes people to live forever” or “the tree that gives life.”

³ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Tree of the knowledge of good and evil

The simplest and most literal explanation of this tree is that its fruit “allows people to know what is good and what is bad.”

In Deut 1:39, the Israelite children who did not understand what was good and bad were allowed into the promised land. This verse and many other Old Testament passages support a widely accepted theory of “innocent children” who are not legally responsible for their actions. But when we, like the rebellious adult Israelites, take the power ourselves to determine right and wrong, what is good and bad for us, we act autonomously and make ourselves, rather than God, the frame of reference for moral guidelines. We take on the role of determining right and wrong that was meant to be God’s

alone. When we do so, we become “like God,” and that is the very thing that God forbids.

Another widely accepted interpretation is that this tree gave additional, divine wisdom. Although God did not prohibit gaining wisdom, he did not want this wisdom to be gained in any way except through himself.

Teaching tool: *You may ask two people to act as each of the trees so that the teams can visualize the separate trees. Or if there is a garden or grove of trees nearby, you may take the group out to show them two different trees as you tell the story or discuss this part of the story.*

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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Story Guide 3

Disobedience

Genesis 3

The snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals God had made. One day Satan entered the snake and asked Eve, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?"

"Of course, we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," Eve replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree that gives the understanding of good and evil that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it. If you do, you will die.'"

"You won't die!" the snake replied. "God knows that when you eat it you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."

She saw that the fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to Adam, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment something inside them changed, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they put leaves together to cover their nakedness.

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, Adam and Eve heard God walking about in the garden. So they hid from God among the trees. Then God called to Adam, "Where are you?"

Adam replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked." "Who told you that you were naked?" God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"

The man replied, "It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it." Then God asked Eve, "What have you done?" "The snake tricked me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."

Then God said to the snake, "Because you have done this, you will be punished. You will crawl on your belly as long as you live. And I will cause hostility between your descendants and the descendants of the woman. You will strike his heel, but he will strike your head."

Then God said to Eve, "I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And to Adam he said, "Since you ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, you will sweat to produce food, until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."

And God made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife. The relationship between God and people was broken. Then God said, "Now people know everything, both good and evil. What if they take fruit from the tree that gives life, and eat it and are broken like this forever? So God banished them from the garden and prevented them from returning to the tree that gave life.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Genesis 2:4-4:26 is a narrative of the creation of the first man and woman and how they were expelled from their idyllic paradise. Genesis 2:4-25 sets up the ideal world and is necessary for understanding the full extent of what Adam and Eve lost when they sinned. The account of the first disobedience in Genesis 3 is the turning point for this section of Scripture. Genesis 4:1-26 shows the aftermath of the disobedience.

Because Gen 2:4 is a traditional heading that indicates a historical account, we assume that Genesis 3 is meant to be understood as a historical narrative. Adam and Eve were real individuals who sinned and suffered the consequences. Their expulsion from the garden forever altered mankind's and the world's state.

Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and lost their blessing. They had to leave the garden, work hard to grow their own food, suffer through the pains of childbirth and difficult husband-wife relationship, and eventually die. Suffering, pain, sin, and death entered the world.

Adam and Eve believed Satan's lie that they would not die. They supposedly would be like God (Gen 3:6). Prosperity proponents propagate this same lie today. Kenneth Hagan, Kenneth Copeland, Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn, and Creflo Dollar interpret being "made in the image of God" as literal; therefore, people are little gods.¹ Taking that error another step, they argue that one has access to the same power as God. Just speak what you want.² This lie began in the garden and continues to circulate worldwide masquerading as a false gospel.³ Proponents emphasize material wealth, perfect health, and success in this lifetime rather than service and submission to the Lord.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – Satan made an appearance and interacted with the man and the woman to question their relationship with God.

The Disobedience – This story is a common thread through all the stories as people wrestle with the sin nature and reconciliation with God.

Suffering Servant – Isaiah announced that a Savior was coming to reconcile the sin of man to offer a restored relationship with God. This Savior though would not be a proud, rich, handsome, flamboyant Savior but would take on the persona of a servant. This Savior's sacrifice would bring forgiveness once and for all from sin for mankind that first appeared in the garden.

Birth of Jesus – As a consequence of disobedience and sin, God sent the Savior to redeem those who choose to repent and follow God through Jesus.

Suffering of Jesus – Death is defeated and sin forgiven through the suffering of the Savior Jesus.

¹ Compelling Truth, "Are Believers in Christ Little Gods?" 2011, <https://www.compellingtruth.org/little-gods.html>.

² Trevor Glass, "Suffer the Children," 2006, video, 63:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X5dpfzXUus>.

³ Danny McDowell, *Apostasia: A Corrupt Church for a Corrupt Age* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishers, 2011).

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

This story seems to begin abruptly, but in Hebrew the discourse marker translated “now” is used to show the beginning of a new scene in the narrative. You may use whatever storytelling device is necessary in your culture to open the story. For example, some languages would naturally begin a story with something like “This story begins with a snake in the garden,” or “God made many animals, but the most cunning was the snake.”

The first sentence of this story connects it to the previous story by talking about God’s creation of animals and his command to not eat from a certain tree.

The Hebrew grammar of “Did God really say” in the snake’s question suggests that the snake is planting a seed of doubt in Eve’s mind about what God really said.

The “you” in “Did God really say that you may not” is plural, so the snake is obviously referring to both Eve and Adam in his question. Every time that the snake uses “you” in this passage it is plural.

Eve answers the snake’s question in the affirmative (of course we can eat) but she is in effect negating what the snake asked, and so in some languages it is most natural to begin her reply with “No! God said....”

In Gen 3:5 the snake gives Eve the possibility of gaining more than what God intended for people when he created them.

Eve does not attempt to convince Adam to take the fruit—she simply gives, and he takes it.

Because “sew” suggests putting something together with needle and thread, we have changed the word to “put.” Use a generic phrase like “put together” in your story.

The Hebrew grammar of Gen 3:8 suggests a habitual action by God. You may explicitly state this in order to suggest that God had an ongoing relationship with Adam and Eve. You may say something like “When the cool evening breezes were blowing, Adam and Eve heard God walking about in the garden as usual.”

“Who told you that you were naked?” This is a question asked by God that really means “How did you know that you were naked?” You may say that instead if it is clearer to your audience.

“What have you done?” really means “Why have you done that?” You may state that if needed in your story.

Even the Hebrew grammar of Gen 3:12 indicates that Adam was trying to minimize his responsibility in his disobedience. He blames God and Eve.

The word translated “hostility” in the NLT connotes the kind of hostility found between nations in a war.

The verb “strike” in Gen 3:15 is used twice but is often translated two different ways in the same sentence: the snake will bite his heel, but he will crush his head. Despite the debate surrounding this verb, there is nothing in the Hebrew text to support two different translations of it. In fact, if using “crush” implies a fatal wound, it should not be used because that does not seem to be implied in the original text. In our story, we have used the same word “strike” in both places.

We have used “descendants” in this story in the plural in Gen 3:15. The Hebrew word is a collective noun similar to offspring and so is never used in the plural. To interpret this noun to refer to both a singular descendant and a collective descendant, one would have to superimpose a meaning on it that is not readily apparent in the text.

The most important translation issue in Gen 3:15 is whether the “he” in “he will strike your head” should be singular or plural. The independent personal pronoun’s antecedent is neuter (it—referring back to offspring and therefore possibly collective), but the Septuagint translates the word as masculine (he) and seems to have a messianic interpretation of the verse. The text remains vague, and we should be cautious about making an explicit messianic reference; therefore, we have chosen the least controversial interpretation for the example story. It is true that the other judgments on the man and woman involve both a judgment and a promise, and the snake’s “promise” is that one day one or more members of the human race will strike the offspring of the snake. Whichever way the audience interprets this verse, it is good news!

We have omitted the last half of Gen 3:16 from the example story because of the confusion and wrong understanding that can arise from it early on in the story set. However, if you think it is important for your story set, you may include it. If you do include it, keep in mind that many Bible scholars view this verse not as a prescriptive punishment from God that man would rule over woman, but that the relationship of equality and unity between man and woman would be distorted by both parties trying to dominate the other. Try to convey that sense in your translation. In some stories we have said something like “there will be tension in your relationship between you and your husband.”

We have omitted Gen 3:20 from the example story, because it did not contribute to the reasons for telling this story. However, many commentators agree that this verse carries a promise—Adam acts in faith that Eve will truly have children and that they will be able to multiply as God originally commanded them. If you feel you need to include this in your story, you may.

God clothes Adam and Eve before he expels them from the garden. His act of grace precedes his act of judgment, and the order of these actions should be maintained in the story.

In Gen 3:5 the snake says that people will be like God, and in Gen 3:22 God says that the people are like him. However, the two phrases probably don’t mean exactly the same thing—when God says it, he does not think it is positive, but the snake makes it sound positive to Eve. Use whatever discourse or word markers are necessary to indicate that difference when you craft the story.

God deliberates with himself in Gen 3:22. In the text, he says, “They have become like us.” This is most likely a plural of deliberation—it is not uncommon for characters to switch between singular and plural when referring to themselves, especially when they are ‘talking to themselves’ as they make decisions.

We do not know whether God is saying that he does not want Adam and Eve to start eating the fruit from the tree of life or if he does not want them to continue eating the fruit. However, the structure of the verse seems to suggest that they had not yet eaten, although that fruit had not been forbidden to them. We explicitly state the brokenness of the relationship between man, woman, and God in this story. God does not want this broken relationship to last forever.

The word translated “banished” in this story is a strong word implying driven out or expelled.

We have omitted details about the guards at the entrance to the garden in order to keep this story simple and avoid distractions. However, the prevention of entry was permanent and forceful, and should be implied as such in your story.

Background Information

Historical

The **fig tree** has the largest leaves of any trees in Palestine and may be why Adam and Eve chose them to make coverings. If your audience does not know the fig tree, or if naming it would be distracting, you may simply say something like large leaves.

Thorns and thistles are thorny plants that grow in Palestine and make a carpet of undergrowth that crowds out new growth. If your culture does not have thorny plants, you may use a word for any kind of weed that hinders growth of produce.

Biblical

The snake is created by God, as is clearly stated in Gen 3:1, leaving no room for the possibility that in the beginning there were two forces—good and evil.

The snake's opening to Eve and Eve's reply that they can't even touch the fruit from the one tree are both exaggerations of God's actual command.

The snake has stated half-truths to Eve. Yes, the fruit will not make her physically die immediately, it will give her a sort of "wisdom," and she will gain some knowledge belonging to God. However, the snake only focused on what she would gain, not on all that she would lose.

Eve sees three advantages to eating the fruit: it looks delicious, it is beautiful, and it will give her wisdom.

In Gen 3:6, the woman chose to do her will rather than God's. When we act autonomously like this, we take the power ourselves to determine right and wrong, what is good and bad for us, and make ourselves, rather than God, the frame of reference for moral guidelines. We take on the role of determining right and wrong that was meant to be God's alone. When

we do so, we become "like God," and that is the very thing that God forbids because it means we become more than he intended for us to be.

The text indicates that Adam was with Eve, but there is no indication of why Adam chose to eat the fruit. He does not have an "excuse;" he does not seem to be deceived like Eve is. However, Jewish and early Christian tradition both place the responsibility for sin's entrance into the world squarely on Adam's shoulders. (See the note on cultural issues below.)

"Walking with God" is a theme throughout the Old Testament that indicates God's presence and fellowship with him. In each case, God's people's holiness and obedience were necessary for him to continue "walking" with them.

Man's "nakedness" is symbolic of shame, a consequence of the guilt from sin. This shame is genuine. No one had to tell Adam that he was naked or what his sin was. He was aware of it on his own.

God does not ask "Why are you hiding?" Instead, even though he already knows Adam and Eve are hiding, he asks, "Where are you?" In Gen 4:9 and Gen 16:8 God asks a similar question. He seeks to draw out rather than drive out. There is a measure of tenderness in his question, and subsequent questions lead the man to confess rather than God condemning. Adam's response suggests that he understands that God is not asking where he is, but rather why he is hiding. Again, God asks the woman what she has done and allows her to tell him, rather than accusing her directly.

God speaks to each character's disobedience with reference to two things—a life function and a relationship. The snake experiences a ban from being upright, and a hostility between his descendants and the woman's. The woman experiences pain in childbirth and a tension in her relationship with the man. The man experiences hard work in the land and

discouragement that comes from that. Each character's judgment involved both a judgment and a promise, and focuses on their life fulfillment (the woman and childbearing, the man and his role as provider). However, both the man and the woman received a measure of grace in their judgments. The woman would not be childless, and the man would manage to eke a living out of the land. The snake is the only one who is promised destruction, and the only one of the three to receive a curse. He is also the only one who is not given the grace and gentleness of being questioned about his disobedience.

Many scholars have interpreted Gen 3:15 to be the earliest reference to God's salvation plan, and many others have argued that there is little evidence to suggest that the word translated "offspring" in the NLT refers to Jesus specifically. In your story, you should allow the meaning to remain vague as we have in the example story, but be aware that if your story crafters are from a Christian background, they may have a pre-conceived interpretation of this verse that they want to include.

It is not clear whether God prescribes or describes the consequences of the disobedience. However, it is apparent that sin has its consequences. This story, whether understood as myth or not, still describes the history of salvation as it has been through the ages: God speaks, man rebels, God punishes, God reconciles.

The return to dust that God describes to Adam is most widely accepted as being a respite from his difficult life, rather than a punishment for his sin. The real punishment is banishment to a difficult life of uncertainty.

God makes clothing for Adam and Eve because, although they made their own clothing, it was not sufficient. The God-made garments were of animal skin and were probably like a long (knee-length) shirt without sleeves. Ultimately, only God can provide covering. The

animal-skin covering God made provided not only physical protection in the new and harsher environment in which they were to find themselves, but also provided a covering for their shame. It is not stated that an animal was killed in order to provide the skin, but it was probably assumed by the original Jewish audience who were accustomed to animal sacrifices and may have seen a link between the shedding of an animal's blood and the provision of a "covering" for sin.

Were Adam and Eve mortal or immortal before they ate the fruit? Would they have lived forever on the earth if they had not eaten the fruit, or would they have eventually left the earth? If they had eaten the fruit from the tree of life, would they have lived forever on the earth? Some scholars have said that eventually Adam and Eve would have left the earth to be with God, but would not have physically died. Eating from the tree of life would have rejuvenated their life on earth and prolonged it. However, there are no clear answers in the text, and the interpretation should remain ambiguous in the story.

At the end of this story, your audience should understand that Adam and Eve have gained nothing (the wisdom the snake promised) and have lost everything (a perfect relationship with God).

God expels them from the garden permanently, as is evidenced by the safeguards he erects at the entrance to the garden. The imagery here would have clearly shown the original audience that God's banishment was his judgment on man and withdrawal of full access to his presence.

Characters

Snake/Satan

Snakes show up in many ancient mythological traditions as either objects of disdain or objects of reverence. They have carried meanings of life, death, and wisdom, and also do in the Bible. Perhaps the most notable non-biblical account of a snake is in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the snake is the man's antagonist. In both non-biblical and biblical ancient accounts of snakes, some can be found who are in opposition to the creator-God. You should ensure that your audience understands that the snake in this story is evil.

Satan entered the snake is implicit information that we have included in the story to clarify what happened. Other passages in the Bible give evidence that Satan was present in the garden in the form of the snake (John 8:44; Rom 16:17-20; Rev 12:9). The apostle Paul's other writings agree. The snake's actions in the garden are in line with Satan's character and role in the world as accuser.

This name refers to the spiritual being, whom God created, who is the leader of the evil spiritual beings who decided to rebel against God. You may need to qualify the name "Satan" with "leader of the evil spirits" if "Satan" is unknown to your audience.

God

Adam

Eve

Tree that gives knowledge of good and evil

Key Terms

Cunning is an ambivalent term—it can have either positive (as in Proverbs) or negative (as in Job) connotations. Although we know that the snake is evil, he is strategic and intelligent when he engages the woman. Most commentators agree that the connotation of this word in this story is one of "intelligent intent to deceive."

Teaching Tool: *Use an example from everyday life to illustrate someone who is cunning. A child who thinks through and carries out a plan to steal candy may be one example of this behavior trait.*

Curse is a word that we have omitted from the example story. In this story, only the snake and the ground are cursed, but not the man or woman. Curse is a pronouncement of injury or harm, and the snake certainly receives harm, both in its punishment of crawling on its belly, and its promise of being struck by the descendants of the woman. Use the word curse with caution. In some languages it implies the use of magic. If so, you may choose to word your story similar to the example story and allow the harsh punishment to speak for itself.

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter's Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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Story Guide 4

God Chose Abraham

Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-6

Adam's and Eve's disobedience separated them from God. Yet God did not forget his special creation. God wanted a relationship with people. Many years passed. Eventually God chose one man from whom to raise a people that would be his. This is the story of Abraham.

God said to Abraham, "Leave your native country, your relatives and go to the land that I will show you. I will make a huge people from your descendants. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

So, Abraham left as God had instructed. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left his homeland. He took his wife, Sarah, and all his wealth—his livestock and all the people he had taken into his household and headed for the land that God would show him. When they arrived there, Abraham traveled through the land. He eventually stopped and set up camp beside a great tree.

Then God appeared to Abraham and said, "I will give this land to your descendants." And Abraham worshiped God, who had appeared to him.

Some time later God spoke to Abraham in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid. I will protect you, and you will receive a great reward." But Abraham replied, "O God, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, a servant in my household will inherit all my wealth."

Then God said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, because you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." Then God took Abraham outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

And Abraham believed God, and God considered him to be in right relationship with him because of his belief.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

This story begins the patriarchal account and sets the scene for the creation of the nation of Israel. The three strands of promise—land, seed, and blessing—are all woven through these accounts but are all simultaneously promised at the beginning of the accounts in Gen 12:1-3. This story is one of promise and faith that leads to obedience. Abraham's response to God was not a spoken "yes," but an action of obedience. However, Abraham's obedience was not a prerequisite to the promise. God spoke the promise before Abraham acted. God is the initiator and continues to be the main actor in the story. Abraham simply receives and responds to God. The account of the reiteration of the promise and God's covenant with Abraham in Gen 15 is widely accepted to be the center point of the Abraham narrative. God's declaration that it was Abraham's faith that gave him right standing with God is the center point of the gospel as declared by Paul throughout his ministry and especially highlighted in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Be warned, the Abrahamic covenant is a guiding principle for prosperity theology. They monetize it, and that is wrong. The blessing of Abraham is interpreted frequently with Gal 3:14a, "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles." What is this blessing? The prosperity interpretation is not found in the second half of the verse, Gal 3:14b, "so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." Instead, prosperity advocates interpret this blessing by returning to Gen 13:2, "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold," and to Gen 24:35-36, "The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys."¹ Their final analysis is: Abraham was very rich, and you should be too!

How are these riches acquired as taught by word of faith practitioners? Their doctrine teaches to harness "force of faith." With faith, one can speak into reality one's desires for wealth and health, willing it into existence.²

Bishop David Oyedepo of Faith Tabernacle Winners Chapel teaches this false doctrine as well. "Faith is dormant. It takes our declaration for faith to deliver. The mouth must be engaged for the wonders to be unleashed. Our victory is in our mouth."³ Oyedepo proof texts each statement with King James Version Scripture verses. David Oyedepo Jr., the heir apparent to his father's pulpit, has led his audience to pray, "Declare it by faith, you will have whatever you are saying."⁴

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Joseph the Dreamer – The descendants of Abraham became a great people special to God. They multiplied to the extent that the size of their population brought concern to the new king of Egypt.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – God demonstrated that he would remain in relationship with the descendants of Abraham as he liberated his people from bondage.

The Warning from Solomon – Solomon was a king of God's chosen people. He was very wealthy, but he lost that relationship because of his disobedience.

Birth of Jesus – The birth of Jesus fulfilled God's promise to Abraham to bless the families of the world through him. This blessing took the form of the humble Savior.

¹ All Scripture verses in this paragraph were quoted from the ESV.

² Dan R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, upd. ed (Downers Grove, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011), Kindle edition.

³ David Oyedepo, "The Wonders of Bold Speaking - Week of Spiritual Emphasis, Day 3," February 9, 2018, video, 22:33-25:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03h4J00VeQs>.

⁴ David Oyedepo, Jr, "Let There Be Light," *NewDawn TV*, April 12, 2022, video, 00:27-2:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oYB4qb7pX4>.

Today's prosperity advocates portray themselves as a "man of God." Their personal anointing from God, they claim, gives them special insight and revelation from God. It is an addition to Scripture. This patriarchal system common across sub-Saharan Africa and around the world is likened to Abraham. It is modeled and taught that Christ is not sufficient and requires an intermediary. Kenneth Mbugua explains, "This false gospel downplays Christ's sufficiency by claiming that rituals and men are channels of blessing from God outside of Christ Jesus."⁵

As this story demonstrates, Abraham's right standing is not based on merit or works. Abraham trusted the Lord. God did bless Abraham materially, but that was not the ultimate objective. The apostle Paul will later reveal that this blessing is manifested when both Jew and Gentile receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through faith (Gal 3:14). Prosperity advocates promote greed rather than holiness, a right relationship with God. The covenant of Abraham is a means to their materialistic ends.

⁵ Kenneth Mbugua, et al., *PROSPERITY? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi, Kenya: Africa Christian Textbooks, The Gospel Coalition, 2015), 23.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The verses chosen for this story reflect specific goals in telling it. The goals in this story were to introduce God's promise to Abraham that he would make him into a great nation (a promise which he subsequently kept) and that through this nation all people would be blessed. We also wanted to highlight that it was Abraham's faith that caused his right standing with God. You should craft this story to accomplish your goals for telling it.

Although God has not yet changed Abram's or Sarai's name to Abraham and Sarah when this story begins, we are using Abraham and Sarah to keep this story simple. If you will have several stories about Abraham in your story set, and if the name change will be an important feature in the stories, then you may want to use the names "Abram" and "Sarai" in this story.

We have purposely omitted place names to simplify the story. If your audience needs to know these place names, or if they will occur in other stories, you may include them.

God does not reveal to Abraham a destination, but rather says that he will tell him when he gets "there." Be sure that your story does not imply that Abraham knew where he was going when he set out. This story says "the land I will show you," but in some languages, it is awkward to "show" something as large as a country. You may say that God told Abraham to go to the land he will take him to rather than show him.

In some languages, "I will make a huge people from your descendants" may not be clear, and you may need to specify that God will give Abraham children (descendants) from whom a huge nation will come.

The grammar of Gen 12:1-3 implies that Abraham leaving his country is a prerequisite to the promises being fulfilled. "You will be a blessing to others" is grammatically one of the focal points of the seven parts of the promise. Abraham's blessings were not for him alone but were to be shared. The second and ultimate focal point is the last one: "All the families on earth will be blessed through you." It answers the question, *To whom will Abraham be a blessing?*

We have omitted the first part of Gen 12:3 because it could distract from the goals for which this story was originally crafted. However, if it is important for your culture to know that the way people treated Abraham directly affected how they were treated by God (blessed or cursed), you may include it. Many later incidents prove this true (later in Gen 12; 30:27; 39:5), and if you have more stories of Abraham in your set, your audience may benefit from the connection.

The grammar of "All the families on earth will be blessed through you" has been debated by many scholars over the years. Some say that "bless" should be understood as reflexive ("All the families on earth will bless themselves through you."). We have chosen to follow the majority and understand this as a passive construction (as does the New Testament in Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8), which implies that God has a plan to use Abraham to be a blessing to the entire world. Alternate, clearer ways to say this are "The blessing I have given to you will become a blessing for all nations" or "Because you have received my blessing, all the nations of the world will also receive it."⁶ The idea is definitely that this blessing is available to everyone on earth, and you may say "all the communities, clans, peoples, or nations" in place of families.

We included Abraham's age when he left for the promised land because it is interesting for many cultures and highlights the miracle that

⁶ William David Reyrburn and Euan McGregor Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 275.

the promise of descendants is. If it is difficult for your audience to remember, you may choose to omit it.

We did not include that Lot accompanied Abraham and Sarah so we could keep the story simple, but you may include him if he appears in later stories.

We have substituted “worshiped God there” for “built an altar” to keep the story simple and reduce the distraction of explaining what an altar would have been used for. In this case, Abraham used it to worship God, so we stated that directly.

You may choose to include a short transition between the passages in Gen 12 and 15 to connect the story line; otherwise, why would God be encouraging Abraham? Many things happened to Abraham in the meantime—he went to Egypt because of famine and had trouble with the Pharaoh, he and Lot parted ways, and Abraham had to rescue Lot from his kidnappers! Although many scholars believe that Gen 14 has nothing to do with Gen 15, God’s encouragement of a reward in Gen 15:1 could follow logically from Abraham’s renunciation of financial gain in Gen 14:20–24. You could keep the connection vague and include a transition sentence like “Life in the promised land wasn’t always easy. In fact, Abraham had many hard times.”

“Do not be afraid” is a common formula used by prophets to encourage a group or an individual. In this case, God may be trying to alleviate Abraham’s fear of seeing a deity or his fear of being childless in a culture where barrenness is a shame. The theophany continues according to a set structure—after God says to not be afraid, he says the same thing twice. The first statement, “I will protect you,” is said from the speaker’s point of view, and the second statement, “You will receive a great reward” (and thus, protection) is told from the benefactor’s point of view. If your language has

a set structure for this kind of statement, you may use it here.

God promised a great reward to Abraham in Gen 15:1, but there’s nothing to indicate that this great reward is a son. Abraham is not concerned in Gen 15:2 that the reward is a son. Instead, he is concerned that he does not have a son, which made the reward useless to him, and any reward certainly would not compensate for the fact that he did not have any descendants. In a sense, Gen 15:1 can be seen as a test from God to which Abraham responded with a reminder to God about his promise of a son from Gen 12. God then specifically answered Abraham with a confirmation of that promise. It is important that your audience understand that the son was to be Abraham’s biological son, because in some cultures (including Abraham’s) a legal heir could also be called a son.

God’s promise to Abraham in Gen 15:4–5 was twofold. He promised him a son and then generations of descendants to come.

The grammar of Gen 15:6 suggests that Abraham’s belief was not a one-time event brought about by the theophany, but an ongoing attitude that began from the beginning of his relationship with God. You could say something like “Abraham continued believing God.”

Background Information

Historical

In Gen 15:3 Abraham said that a servant in his household would inherit whatever God gave him. This may reflect a widespread cultural norm of his day in which a childless couple “adopts” a son, who is usually a slave, to take care of them, bury and mourn for them, and inherit what they have when they die.

Biblical

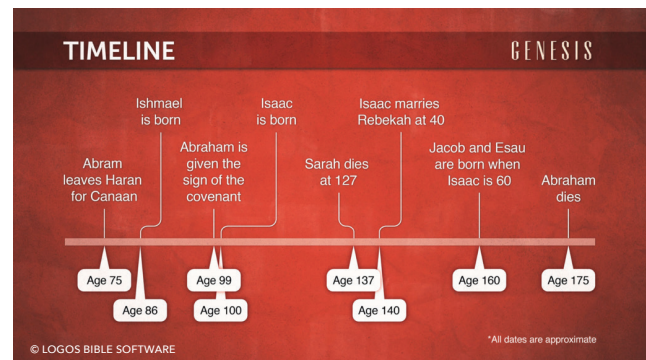
When Abraham reached the promised land, he set up camp in Shechem beside a great oak tree and built his first altar to God there.

Abraham's first call was while he was still in Ur (Acts 7:2-4), but he waited until his family had gone on to Haran before he left. He may have left after his father died. (Stephen thinks so in Acts 7:2-4.) Whatever the case, Abraham did not leave immediately after the call; however, no disobedience is implied in the text. Obedience should not always be defined as immediate action.

Some commentators believe that Abraham's father was still alive when he left, meaning that Abraham really did leave his father as well as his relatives. "Father's household" referred not only to people, but to any rights to the inheritance or family property. Property, inheritance, and descendants were very important in the culture of that time because they were the things that ensured the physical survival of the family as well as the family's identity. The sum of these things provided a person's security.

It is God who made Abraham's name famous—it was a gift from God, and there was nothing Abraham could do to make it happen. God said later that kings would come from Abraham, and he used similar terminology about making David's name famous, all implying that "famous" is royal terminology. Abraham's name is truly famous today. The three major religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all look to Abraham as a "father" of their faith.

We have included the detail that Abraham stopped at a large tree when he arrived in the promised land. You may choose to omit this detail if your audience would infer from this that Abraham would have performed a religious rite specifically under that tree. Later Hebrew law condemned such Canaanite practices. However, the wording of this sentence implies that this tree was already known as either a sacred



site of some sort or at least as a tree under which decisions were made and judgment pronounced. Some Bible translations actually call this a "sacred tree." We would discourage that adjective, simply because it might imply in some cultures that Abraham worshiped gods other than the Creator God. However, it may be significant that in a place where people most likely worshiped false gods, the true God revealed himself to Abraham and promised him that land.

It is significant that the first thing Abraham did in the new land was build an altar to God so that he could worship him. The Hebrew construction indicates that as Abraham traveled south from his first stop at the tree, he continued to build altars to God each time he stopped. Abraham practiced worship and thanksgiving wherever he went. These places of worship defined the areas of land that God had promised to Abraham, and they later became religious centers in Israel.

In Gen 12:7 God appeared to Abraham (theophany) in a vision, rather than just speak to him, thus heightening the original audience's awareness of divine activity. The reward God promised Abraham (Gen 15:1) was not based on his work. Rather, God gave Abraham a gift and reassured him that his trust in God was well placed. You may need to clarify that in your story.

If someone at that time were convinced that his god wanted to give him a son, he most likely would have performed some kind of fertility rite. When God again promises Abraham a son

in Gen 15:4, we do not see Abraham performing any kind of rite. Abraham trusted his God completely and placed the responsibility for fulfilling the promise squarely on God's shoulders.

God declared that his relationship with Abraham was good because of Abraham's act of faith in believing him. "Righteousness" here can be described as "right relationship," and we have stated that in the example story. If the abstract idea of "right relationship" is difficult for your audience, you may describe it in terms of action: "and so God accepted Abraham." (See "Righteousness" in the key terms section below.)

Characters

Adam and Eve

In the example story, Adam and Eve appear as connectors between the previous story and this one. If you have other stories in between, you would not need to use the names of Adam and Eve in this introduction.

God

Abraham

Sarah

Abraham's household

Abraham brought his livestock, his gold and silver, and all the people who worked for him as his servants. These servants were fully under his authority and control.

Key Terms

Nation is rendered "a huge people" in the example story. The original word used for nation in Gen 12:2 includes the idea of a political nation with its own designated territory. God did indeed make Abraham's descendants into a nation in a socio-political sense. However, in the New Testament the idea of God's people (God's nation) is redefined to include anyone who has turned from his sins and turned to

Jesus to save him. We have chosen, for our initial story set, to use a broader term for nation so that the New Testament concept of God's people can be more quickly understood, because we do not have an entire biblical text in which to develop it. However, you should consider the best option for your set.

Teaching tool: *You may compare Abraham's descendants to a unique people group within a socio-political nation. Many of our story crafting teams will relate to that example, because they are a specific, unique people group within a larger national context.*

Bless carries the idea of God acting favorably towards someone, often in terms of giving them descendants and material possessions. In this case, Abraham's blessing carries both of these ideas.

Vision

A vision is distinguished from a dream in that its purpose is to share a word from God, whereas a dream's purpose is to show something. The form of the vision (theophany) Abraham received in Gen 15:1 is vague, as are most in the Bible, in order to highlight the message from God rather than the form of the vision.

Believe

This term in Gen 15:6 indicates holding firm or steadfast to something and trusting with confidence. It implies that Abraham did something (obeyed) as a result of his belief.

Righteousness

The abstract term *righteousness* can be described in terms of right/good relationship or right standing with God. The Old Testament idea of righteousness is based on relationship between God and man, or between man and man. Righteousness refers to holiness, right standing, lack of guilt. The CEV translated this concept in Isa 53:11 in the following way: "He will take the punishment for the sins of others, so that many of them will no longer be guilty."

Some languages may not have one term for “relationship,” or the term may have unwanted connotations. Some languages express the idea in terms of action. TEV translates Gen 15:6 as “Abram put his trust in the LORD, and because of this the LORD was pleased with him and accepted him.”

The term *righteousness* refers to a person who is loyal to a covenant and acts according to a set standard. It is always accompanied by a specific act that renders someone “in right standing.” In Abraham’s case, however, it was achieved not by something he did, but through God’s gracious gift.

The way this story conveys the concept of righteousness and how Abraham received it is very important to the rest of the stories. Paul later confirmed in Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6 that Abraham was righteous because of his belief, and the New Testament makes it clear that our righteousness (our acceptance by God) is based solely on our faith in Jesus. Be sure that you test both the term used for righteous and the means by which Abraham received it.

Your audience may also have idioms that describe the concept of righteousness, such as having a straight heart, being upright, being blameless/innocent, walking on God’s path, etc. Take these into account as you choose the appropriate wording for your story.

Worship

In this case, worship probably refers both to Abraham’s sacrifice (his action) and his calling God by his personal name (prayer). In Gen 12:7, Abraham built an altar (although we are not told that he actually burned an offering on it). An altar is a raised-up platform made of earth or stone on which animals or incense was burned in order to please God, either as a thanksgiving or as an atonement for sin.

Worship’s foundation is the idea of service, shown through showing awe and wonder to God.⁷

Patriarchs thought this worship could take place anywhere God had revealed himself. The Old Testament set up a complicated sacrificial system in the temple. Jesus made it clear that this sacrificial system of worship is no longer necessary, and that our worship should be based on our love for God. Different cultures and languages have different words for worship, some of which refer only to certain ceremonies or rituals. In most cases where “worship” is used in the Bible, it implies more than just performing rituals. It includes the heart of love and the worshiper’s wonder and awe of God. Be sure that the word or combination of words you choose for “worship” includes this idea. This is a good place to discuss how your audience worships—what do they do? What kind of attitude do they have toward God when they worship? Why do they worship? When and where do they worship?

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, “Worship,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, Derek R. W. Wood, et al., eds., 3rd ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1250.

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Story Guide 5

Abraham's Suffering: Abraham and Isaac

Genesis 22:1-19

Abraham and his wife Sarah suffered for years because they did not have their own children. God did eventually keep his promise to Abraham, though, and he gave him a son with his wife Sarah. Abraham named him Isaac, and Isaac grew to be a boy.

Sometime later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called. "Yes," Abraham said, "here I am." God said, "Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you."

The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He told the servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."

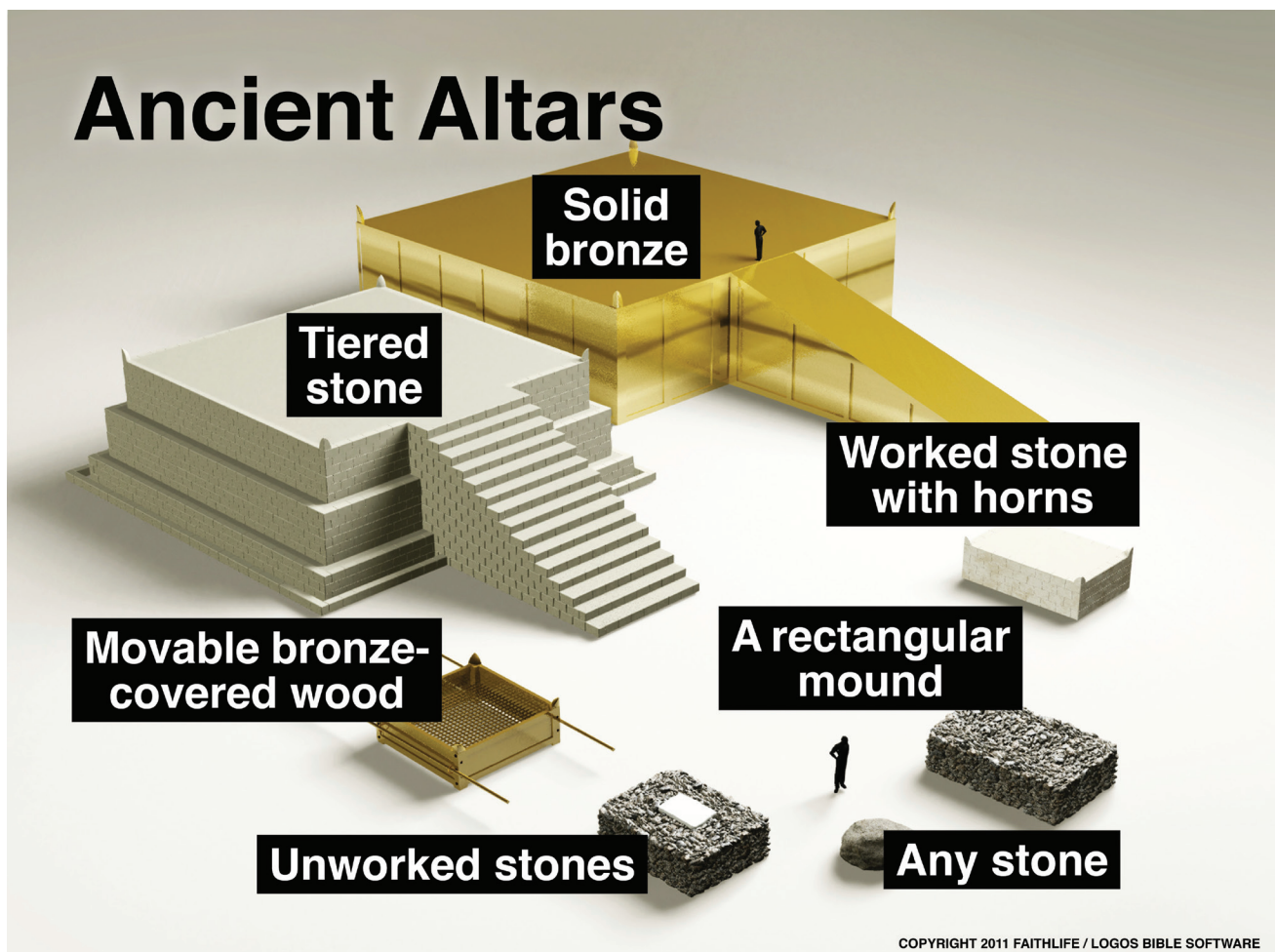
Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, Isaac turned to Abraham and said, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham said. "We have the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," And they both walked on together.

When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. At that moment the angel of God called to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" Abraham answered, "Yes! Here I am!" The angel said, "Don't lay a hand on the boy! Do not hurt him in any way, because now I know that you truly honor God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son."

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush, so he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.

Abraham named the place "God will provide." Then the angel of God called again to Abraham from heaven. "This is what God says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me."

Then they returned to the servants and traveled back to their home.



True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

This story is the pinnacle of Abraham's life story. It describes his ultimate trust in God and the subsequent renewal of God's covenant to him that formed the basis of the rest of Israelite, and subsequently, the world's, history. This story is strikingly similar grammatically and structurally to the Gen 12:1-9 account of God asking Abraham to leave his homeland and go to a new country.

Some readers find this story disturbing. How could a God who condemned child sacrifice command his follower to perform it? In theory, Abraham would have wondered the same thing; however, most of the surrounding nations practiced child sacrifice to such an extent that Abraham may not have questioned the appropriateness of the request. What we do know is that Abraham did not question God even if he thought that God's request went against God's own nature. Abraham allowed God to deal with the theological problems that he had created for himself. Ultimately, Abraham had to choose between the giver and the gift. In this story, Abraham chose the giver, and his choice was rewarded. God's test for Abraham fulfilled its purpose. It revealed Abraham's obedience to him.

Yet prosperity advocates today suggest that the gifts God gives are the better choice. Success, wealth, the perfect spouse, and health are all obtainable now. Suffering has no place in prosperity doctrine. Suffering is often associated with sin.

"Prosperity preaching is popular because it taps into this most basic of human desires. But it offers a solution to suffering that is unbiblical, misleading and, ultimately, detrimental to those who follow it. And rather than saving people, this false solution leaves many discouraged, disillusioned, and bitter with God and his people."¹

As this story series reveals, the biblical account demonstrates many who face suffering on their path following God. After suffering for years with infertility, Abraham was asked the impossible, to sacrifice his son. Faithfulness to the Lord is never a guarantee of a carefree, healthy life, but a life of faith. Abraham chose a life of obedient relationship with God rather than his own path.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Joseph the Dreamer – God used Joseph, a grandson of Isaac, to show that no matter how much we walk with God, we may suffer and be unjustly accused.

Moses Chose True Prosperity – God demonstrated that he would remain in relationship with the descendants of Abraham as he liberated his people from bondage.

Jeremiah – While there were consequences to disobedience, God was faithful. He honored the covenant even though the descendants of Abraham did not always reciprocate their faith in him.

Birth of Jesus – God fulfilled his promise to Abraham to bless the families of the world through him. This blessing took the form of the humble Savior.

Cost of Following – While salvation is free through Jesus, the life of a believer has challenges. Christians are not guaranteed an easy life.

Suffering of Jesus – Abraham was asked to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, which ultimately pointed to God's plan of redemption through the sacrifice of his perfect Son, Jesus.

¹ Michael Maura et al., *Prosperity? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi, Kenya: Africa Christian Textbooks, The Gospel Coalition, 2015), 118.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Genesis 12 and Genesis 22 begin in strikingly similar ways grammatically. In both instances, Abraham was asked to do something that caused him to get up and leave for an unknown destination. In both instances, Abraham obeyed seemingly immediately. If your story crafters have crafted a Gen 12 story, you may choose to look at the discourse structure and narrative style of the way they began their first story and begin this story in much the same way.

Genesis 22:1 says that God tested Abraham. Use a word that implies that God wanted to prove that Abraham believed in him, rather than that he was tempting him in order to incite sin. You may find it more natural to talk about God testing Abraham's faith, rather than testing Abraham himself. In this case, God was not expecting Abraham to fail. You should be sure that you do not use a word that implies that Abraham will fail the test.

"Here I am" in Gen 22:1 and 22:11 implies that Abraham was waiting for further instruction or communication from God.

When God told Abraham to "take your son," the grammar implies that God knew he was asking Abraham to do something staggering. This grammar is used by God only five times in the Old Testament, and each time, he asks someone to do something of great magnitude.

"Son ... only son ... Isaac" is a continuum, with each phrase striking closer to Abraham's heart. The list moves from general to more intimate. However you choose to express this in your language, make sure that it is clear that God is asking Abraham to do something very difficult.

"Whom you love so much" refers to the love of a father for a son.

The fact that Abraham left early in the morning is widely accepted to indicate that Abraham was willingly and unhesitatingly obedient.

Abraham saddled his donkey. This does not refer to placing a leather riding saddle on him, but to loading the donkey. You may say "loaded the donkey" if necessary. A donkey was a small horse-like animal used for carrying loads. If your culture does not recognize such an animal, you may say something more general like "a small animal used for carrying loads."

"Chopped wood for a fire" means to split the wood so that it will burn well. Some languages have a special word for firewood, and that word should be used here.

The fire that Abraham carried probably refers to live coals or embers from a previous campfire.

We have omitted the place name Moriah from this story because our audience probably does not know it. Moriah is believed by some to be the place where David later experienced a theophany and where Solomon later constructed the temple.

The statement in Gen 22:10 is meant to slow down and emphasize the action. (Abraham pulls out his knife to slaughter Isaac.) Each move of Abraham is recorded. Your story crafting teams may want to slow down the pace of their speech or emphasize this climax in the action in a culturally appropriate way also.

The Hebrew word used for "to kill" in Gen 22:10 is a verb used for the action of slaughtering for both secular and sacred purposes. It is also the verb used to talk about pagan child sacrifice.

The angel in Gen 22:11 spoke with urgency, as evidenced by the grammatical device of repetition of Abraham's name. Be sure that your story conveys the sense of urgency in the angel's message.

The fear of God the angel spoke about in Gen 22:12 refers to an obedience that is so committed to God that it does not hold anything back. Another way to say this is, “I know that you respect/honor God, or I know that you do what God tells you to do.”

The bush in Gen 22:13 refers to a patch of dense underbrush or shrubbery. It would have enough branches that a ram could get its horn caught in it.

In Hebrew, the beginning of Gen 22:13 suggests that Abraham is completely surprised by the appearance of the ram. The Hebrew grammar of the text suggests that the ram had just been caught by the horns.

Notice that although Abraham tells his son that God will provide a sheep, God, in fact, provided a ram. We do not know why. However, we do know that Abraham identified the ram’s presence with the provision of God from the fact that he named the place “God will provide” in Gen 22:14.

God called to Abraham again in Gen 22:15, signifying the importance of the event. Then God made a rare form of an oath, swearing by himself.

Genesis 22:17-18 reconfirmed the promise God gave Abraham in Gen 12:2-3, but it uses even more emphatic phrasing. In Gen 22:18 God mentioned for the first time that the promise was through Abraham’s descendants (not just Abraham) that all the nations of the world would be blessed. Perhaps the use of “descendants” here is a reference to the fact that Abraham’s line has just been rescued through the provision of the ram. Use similar wording (but perhaps more emphatic) to restate this promise as you did in the earlier story so that your audience will connect the stories.

“All because you have obeyed me” is a crucial statement. Abraham’s obedience as well as the nation of Israel’s was crucial to the establishment of their homeland.

Background Information

Historical

If Moriah is to be identified with later-day Jerusalem, then it is about 50 miles northeast from Beer-sheba, where Abraham lived. He would have averaged 16-17 miles per day on his journey if he truly took three days to travel. It would not have necessarily taken three days to travel that distance, so it is possible that it would have been only two days and part of a third. It is also possible that the phrase “the third day” is a Hebrew equivalent of something like “the eleventh hour”—a way to express an ominous event. Several ominous events throughout the Bible seem to occur on the third day. Scholars are not 100 percent sure that Moriah is to be equated to the later Temple Mount in Solomon’s Jerusalem, and the approximate vicinity of Calvary. In fact, the hills around Jerusalem were wooded and probably would not have necessitated carrying firewood to the spot. However, the language used in this story (Gen 22:14) and in later descriptions of the Temple Mount in Isaiah is similar, just as the description of Mount Sinai (the “mountain of the Lord” in Num 10:33). What we do know is that Moriah is to be considered a sacred place (like the temple and like Calvary) where Abraham obeyed God and God provided, even if it is not physically on the same spot.

Biblical

It is God who tests Abraham, not Satan. When God is the subject who does the action of testing, he is almost always doing it in order for the people to evidence their fear of him by obeying and trusting him.

If your audience has heard about Ishmael, they may be confused about why God calls Isaac Abraham’s *only son*. Isaac is the only son of Abraham and Sarah, the one who can be an heir (Gen 17:15-17). As such, it would have been natural to use this expression.

A whole burnt offering is meant to be completely consumed by the fire. It is the only offering that is mentioned during the patriarchal age. Isaac knew what was involved—he asked where the sheep was. The animal used for a burnt offering was killed before being burned. Throughout the ancient Near East, these offerings were usually meant as a gift to a god, or as a way to establish communion with him. At this point in history, the concept of substitution in sacrifice was not widely practiced in the ancient Near East. In your story you may need to describe the purpose of the offering rather than calling it a burnt offering. You could say something like “Where is the sheep for our offering/gift to God?”

The real test for Abraham is more than just the test of sacrificing a son—it is sacrificing the one avenue through which God can fulfill his promise to Abraham.

Some scholars say that Abraham's role as the father of the nation of Israel required an unparalleled test. Jewish rabbis claim that God never tests someone beyond what they can bear. Whatever the case, it is clear that Abraham trusted God to handle the theological and moral issues that he himself had created in this situation. Abraham's trust in God was truly unparalleled in this situation.

Many have issues with believing that our God commanded Abraham to do such a reprehensible thing. And, if Abraham was a true God-worshiper, how could he have believed that God truly wanted him to do such a thing? Child-sacrifice was so prevalent in that time in the surrounding faiths and countries that it is possible that Abraham would have seen child sacrifice as an unsurprising command. It is certain that child sacrifice continued to be prevalent in the neighboring nations for many generations to come. It was so prevalent that Israelite priests and leaders had to continually tell people that it was wrong.

Some believe that Abraham's statement to the servants in verse 5 is a clumsy lie, but Heb 11:17–19 interprets it instead as an amazing statement of Abraham's faith that God would raise up Isaac again, even if he did take his life.

It seems that Isaac did not resist being tied up. He was old enough to carry wood on his shoulders, so presumably he was old enough to struggle with his father in resistance. No indication of resistance is given in the text.

If Isaac did not resist, the question remains as to why Abraham bound him. Perhaps he wanted to delay the task, or perhaps he wanted to make sure that his knife found the mark in order to kill mercifully.

The knife Abraham carried would have been made of flint and very lethal. The Bible does not tell us exactly what kind of knife it was, but we know that it could have butchered an animal. Some languages have special words for this kind of knife, or for a kind of knife used in animal sacrifices.

Abraham names the place “God provides” rather than focusing on his own obedience. Abraham continues to be God-centered.

Many, but not all, commentators believe that Gen 22:15–18 were included in the narrative at a later date. However, this repetition of the promise is in keeping with the theme of the story—that Abraham's obedience has an ultimate consequence that reaches far past Isaac's rescue.

Genesis 22:18 is the first time that God relates his promise to Abraham with Abraham's obedience—until now it has been unconditional. Clearly, works is secondary to faith in the biblical narrative about Abraham.

Characters

Isaac

We are not sure how old Isaac is at the time of this story. Abraham calls him a “lad” in Gen 22:5, which suggests that he is a youth not quite into his manhood. Jewish tradition claims that he was thirty-seven years old, his age when his mother Sarah died. They suggest that she died of shock from discovering that Isaac was to be sacrificed. However, most scholars believe Isaac was a youth.

Servants

Abraham’s two servants were probably young men who belonged to Abraham as slaves.

Angel

If you have a Bible translation, your best option would be to use the word for “angel” in the translation, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you don’t have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original word. An “angel” is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form, they are inferior to Jesus, and they often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for “angel” that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as “messenger of/from God,” “envoy of God,” or perhaps “ambassador of God.” Be aware, though, that “prophet” also conveys those meanings. You might have to add “spirit (messenger from God)” to this description.

In this case, the angel as God’s messenger is almost indistinguishable from God himself.

Angel of the LORD in the Old Testament refers to a manifestation of Yahweh to a person. This explains why, in Gen 22:12, the grammar switches from third person to first person.

Key Terms

Bless

This refers to when God helps, does good to, or favors someone or something. In the Creation and Abraham stories, the specific blessing includes God giving them the ability to reproduce and multiply. Try to avoid using a word related to luck or games of chance.

Worship

In this case, “worship” probably refers to Abraham’s sacrifice (his action). The Hebrew word literally means to “bow down,” and refers to praise or prayer to a superior. Abraham’s act of praise was going to involve a sacrifice.

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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Story Guide 6

Joseph the Dreamer

Genesis 37-40

Just as God promised, Abraham had many descendants and they lived in the land God had promised them. Abraham's grandson was Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, but one of the youngest sons, Joseph, was his favorite. This is the story of the journey of Joseph.

Jacob showed how much he loved Joseph by giving him a special coat. Joseph also knew he was special. He even had dreams from God that showed that one day he would rule over his family. Joseph told his family about these dreams. Joseph's brothers hated him because of these things.

One day Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to watch his animals. Sometime later Jacob said to Joseph, "Go check on your brothers." So, Joseph obeyed his father and went to the field to look for his brothers. The brothers recognized Joseph walking toward them in the distance. They said to each other, "Ah, here comes the dreamer! Let's get rid of him once and for all." When he arrived, they threw him down a dry well. Sometime later they saw some traders going by on their way to Egypt, so they took Joseph out of the well and sold him to the traders as a slave. Then they took Joseph's coat and put animal blood on it and sent the coat to Jacob. Jacob believed his son had died, so he mourned his death.

But Joseph was taken with the traders to Egypt where they sold him as a slave to one of the king's officials. In that household God was with Joseph. Joseph succeeded in everything he did. Soon the master put him in charge of his entire household. Joseph was also very handsome—so handsome that the master's wife wanted to sleep with him. But Joseph refused and ran out of the house. He said, "How can I sin against God and my master like this?" But one day the woman caught him by his robe. Joseph left his robe in her hands and ran away. When the husband came home, she told him, "That servant of yours tried to rape me." The master was furious. He threw Joseph into jail even though Joseph hadn't done anything wrong.

But even in jail God was with Joseph, and Joseph succeeded in everything he did. Soon the jail's guard put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners. A servant of the king was a prisoner in the jail. One day he had a dream that he didn't understand. He told Joseph his dream, but Joseph said, "I can't interpret dreams—only God can." God told Joseph what the dream meant. Joseph told the servant, and sure enough, the dream came true. As the servant was going back to serve the king, Joseph said, "Please remember me when you're released and talk to the king about me."

But the servant didn't remember Joseph when he went back, and Joseph stayed in jail for two more years.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Just as God promised Abraham, the number of his descendants continued to grow. This special people were set apart for the Lord to bless the nations who were living in the land the Lord had promised. They were growing in their relationship with God. They found their prosperity in a right relationship with El Shaddai, God Almighty, not earthly fortune and power (Gen 15-25).

God's people were not entirely successful in living this holy, set apart life, as demonstrated by Joseph's father Jacob. As a young man, Jacob had been manipulative and deceptive in obtaining the birthright that belonged to his older and favored twin, Esau (Gen 25, 27). After many years passed, Jacob had a theophany experience of wrestling with God. Jacob was given the new name Israel, as he had struggled with God and men and prevailed (Gen 32).

A recurring theme of favoritism in the lineage of the patriarchs comes to a crescendo in the story of Jacob's son Joseph. A simple gift of a special robe and Joseph's youthful boasting about his special dreams weave a narrative of jealousy, human trafficking, deception, false imprisonment, and the ultimate reconciliation of a dysfunctional family. Throughout the escalating drama, the Lord was with the protagonist Joseph. God spared his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, from a worldwide famine (Gen 27-50).

The complex narrative spanning decades demonstrates to all of us, including prosperity advocates, that in God's sovereignty there are no guarantees of an easy life. Like his ancestor Abraham before him, Joseph endured difficulties and trials. Joseph suffered physical and mental abuse from his brothers. He suffered as a slave and a prisoner. He suffered another two years in prison after being told his case would be presented to the king.

The word of faith community has difficulty explaining suffering. According to them, one should be able to speak forth their faith force and compel God to act. It is considered a failure

of faith when suffering occurs.¹ John Piper, founder and lead teacher of *Desiring God*, warns, "Look out for the absence of a serious doctrine of the biblical necessity and normalcy of suffering—the absence of a doctrine of suffering. As Paul went through the churches, he said that basic discipleship was to teach that you must enter the kingdom through many tribulations" (Acts 14:21).²

Rather than succumbing to his circumstances, Joseph matured and grew closer to God. In his suffering, all Joseph had was God. Through this, Joseph modeled reliance on God despite difficult circumstances. God is with us even at our lowest points. Joseph served in the house of Potiphar as a slave with no hope of being compensated. Joseph then served his fellow prisoners and the warden while in prison. Joseph remained faithful to God (Gen 39-50).

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God Chose Abraham – God chose a specific man for the purpose of blessing the nations through his descendants. Joseph, one of these descendants, does not appear to be the best choice to carry this line.

Joseph the Servant Leader – Joseph matured in his relationship with God. He was used in God's plan to save his chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, from famine. Joseph chose to forgive his brothers, serve his family, God's people, and the people of Egypt as well.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – God demonstrated that he would remain in relationship with the descendants of Abraham as he liberated his people from bondage.

Jeremiah – While there were consequences for disobedience, God was faithful to his covenant agreement with Abraham's descendants.

¹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175-177.

² John Piper, "Six Keys to Detecting the Prosperity Gospel," *Desiring God*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/six-keys-to-detecting-the-prosperity-gospel>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The story begins with two interesting storylines. The first is the rising hatred of the brothers toward Joseph, leading to his sale into slavery. The second is the foreshadowing, through the dreams, of Joseph's rise to power.

For the sake of brevity, this story does not go into the details of Joseph's dreams but rather just the meaning that his family would bow to him, and he would rule them.

The flocks that the brothers tended were sheep and goats. We used a broader term, "animals."

Our example story does not include the price the brothers received for Joseph, the twenty pieces of silver. This value was perhaps two years' worth of salary. You may say that he was sold for the average price of a male slave in those days.

We have mentioned Egypt in the example story. If Egypt is unknown, or if naming the country distracts or causes issues, you may choose to say "a neighboring country."

The sentence "Does not this robe belong to your son?" distances the brothers from Joseph in a way that they would have wanted to be distanced, and in a way that allows Jacob to draw his own conclusions about what happened. Ironically, Jacob made the same conclusion that the brothers were planning to tell him.

Genesis 37:36 shows a parallel discourse feature—Jacob was mourning for his supposedly dead son as this same son was actually being sold to an Egyptian official.

The term "Ishmaelite" traders has been changed to "foreign" traders because the audience may not know who Ishmael is.

A major theme running through this section of the narrative is that The LORD was with

Joseph. It is a fact, not a promise. This is the only section of the Joseph narrative in which God's covenant name Yahweh is used—and that by the narrator, not by any of the characters themselves. Why? Most probably to show that at the lowest moment of Joseph's life, God was truly with him just as he was with the patriarchs. The name Yahweh is used in the narratives of the patriarchs to tell of God's presence as well. Potiphar notices God's presence also, and the text seemingly says that he knew it was Yahweh who was with Joseph, even though Potiphar is not a Yahweh-ist, and although we have no knowledge of how he would know this. All references to "Yahweh" (translated "LORD" in the English text) have been changed to "God" to avoid confusion over who is being talked about. "God" is also intentionally used to avoid any unwanted religious connotations.

The text states several times that Joseph was given authority over his master's entire household, showing that this was an important piece of information.

Joseph was Potiphar's personal attendant, which means that he served and ministered to Potiphar. This is the same job that he did while in prison in Gen 40:4.

God prospered whatever was in Joseph's hand, Potiphar gave many things into Joseph's hand, and Joseph left his cloak in the hands of Potiphar's wife. The idea of "leaving in one's hands" is a figure of speech used throughout the original text.

"Joseph was a handsome ... man" begins a new scene and is appropriately marked in the original Hebrew discourse. If there is an oral discourse marker in your language for beginning a new scene, you may use it here.

Potiphar's wife's demand in Gen 39:7 is a command. She was Joseph's superior and technically, Joseph should obey her. The command should be translated as such, but if your culture necessitates the use of a euphemism for the act of sexual relations, you should use it.

Genesis 39:10 shows a definite boundary on Joseph's part. He would not even be near Potiphar's wife.

The word used for the garment that Joseph left behind with Potiphar's wife means either the outer garment or one of his undergarments. Ancient Egyptian art most often depicts workers as being bare above the waist and wearing a skirt. If that is the case here, it would be easy for Potiphar's wife to pull it off, leaving Joseph naked. Because we are not sure of the exact nature of the garment Joseph was wearing, the more general the term used here, the better.

Potiphar's wife calls Joseph a Hebrew slave, but your audience may not know that title for Abraham's descendants. Unless you have already identified and introduced a term for Abraham's descendants, you may choose to do as we have done in the example story and call Joseph a "foreign slave."

Note that Potiphar's wife does not name Joseph, probably as a result of common Egyptian anti-Semitism. Inquire into which situations characters in your storytelling culture should or should not address others with their names.

Genesis 39:17 can be read as "That Hebrew slave that you have brought to make sport of me," indicating that Potiphar's wife was trying to implicate him in the guilt as well. You may describe this as the slave coming to insult, offend, dishonor, or make fun of. "Fool around with me" provides the opportunity for an open-ended interpretation. Potiphar can (and does) interpret those words however he likes.

Potiphar's wife said that Joseph left his cloak "beside her" (Gen 39:15, 18) rather than the truthful "in her hand" (Gen 39:12) so that it would look like Joseph initiated the situation, and she had nothing to do with it.

Potiphar probably did not throw Joseph into prison himself, so you may render this as "Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison."

Choose one title for Pharaoh and remain consistent throughout the stories. We have chosen the more widely understood term "king."

We have omitted the detailed content about Pharaoh's servants and their dreams to keep the story as short as possible. Although interesting, the content of these dreams does not significantly contribute to the overall reason for telling this story. The details of the dreams would challenge the reproducibility of the story.

In Gen 40:14, Joseph was very polite and modest when he requested the favor from one of the king's servants, the cupbearer. Your story should reflect that. His explanation in Gen 40:15 appeals even more to the emotions. Joseph was a foreigner who owed the cupbearer nothing, yet he has done such a favor for him. We have chosen to refer to the cupbearer as a servant as this is a more general term rather than the specific and potentially misunderstood title. In some cultures' storytelling style, the servant would need to make a reply of some sort to Joseph for the story to make sense. Although we don't know what the servant said, he probably made some sort of ambiguous affirmation.

Background Information

Historical

The name of the Pharaoh is never mentioned in the Genesis accounts, perhaps because Egyptians believed him to be a god, and the Israelites, placing great emphasis on names, would not have wanted to invoke that kind of name.

The Nile River was the livelihood of the nation of Egypt, providing stability and economic prosperity to the land. As such, it was deified in Egyptian religion. The water level of the Nile (high or low) greatly affected the region's economic prosperity and determined times of famine and of plenty. It is the longest river in the world (6,695 km) and floods the surrounding area every year, providing much needed irrigation to crops and minerals to the surrounding

soil. The banks of the Nile provide a habitat for many forms of vegetation and wildlife.

Biblical

Jacob loved Joseph because he was born to Jacob in his old age by Rachel. Rachel was Jacob's favored wife. She had not been able to bare children until an advanced age.

Jacob gave Joseph a coat—the first reference to clothing in a story where clothing seems to symbolize change in social status. Joseph gained status by receiving the coat, and then is stripped of status and the coat when the brothers throw him in the cistern. Potiphar's wife strips him of his clothing. Joseph is eventually given new clothing by the Pharaoh, and then he gave new clothing to his brothers.

Joseph's dreams are the first to appear in the Bible that do not include the voice of God in them; therefore, they are not theophanies. Their nature remains ambiguous, and we should allow our listeners to draw their own conclusions and allow the following stories to interpret them, rather than interpret them ourselves within the story. In general, dreams in the ancient near east were considered serious and usually from a divine source. They were deemed revelations if they contained references to a deity, but omens if not necessarily irreversible.

The Bible does not state Joseph's motivation for sharing the dreams. It could have been a simple, naïve prophecy on his part, without the realization of just how exactly those dreams were to be fulfilled. However, the brothers immediately drew their own conclusions.

Remember that Jacob and his children have already had to bow down before his brother Esau, so his protest here may include some bitterness about his past life.

It seems odd that Jacob would send Joseph to check on the brothers if he knew about their hatred for him. However, it fits the motif found

throughout the entire Joseph story of Jacob and the brothers being the uninformed players in the story. Jacob himself was the younger brother in the family of origin.

Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers, who were in Shechem. Shechem is about 80 kilometers from the Valley of Hebron where Jacob's family resided, and probably, with sheep in tow, it would have taken the brothers twenty hours to travel there. Then, Joseph had to travel even further (another 24 kilometers to Dothan) because his brothers were not at Shechem. In all, Joseph travels 105 kilometers to find his brothers—not a small journey in those times. It is unclear in the text as to why the brothers would be so far from home, and why Jacob sends Joseph that long way alone. Much speculation has arisen from these seemingly illogical details, from the idea that the Joseph story is a compilation of two different traditions to a re-rendering of the geographic locations mentioned here. The fact remains, however, that the text we have uses these place names. Your story does not have to mention town names, but the brothers are far enough away that they were not able to come home every night. This distance aided in their plot to get rid of Joseph with little fear of their father finding out the truth.

The text seems to imply that Jacob was not aware of the full extent of his sons' hatred for Joseph.

The brothers' name for Joseph "the dreamer" is ironic in that later, Joseph truly is a master dreamer, and his dreams permit him into the highest courts of Egypt.

We are not sure for how long Jacob would have mourned for Joseph. Other examples of people mourning in those times range from seven to seventy days. They often tore their clothing, put ashes on their heads, and wore coarse sackcloth made of goat or camel hair.

Jacob's family all tried to comfort him: the deceivers became comforters.

Potiphar was an officer of the king of Egypt, but it is unclear exactly what this officer does. Most scholars believe that he was in charge of those who protected the king.

The text makes it clear that it was God himself, and not anything that Joseph did, that caused him success. "The LORD was with him" has the sense of God's guidance or help. If your language requires more action, you may say something like, "God helped him in everything he did, so Joseph did well."

Genesis 39:5 is a part of a fulfillment of Gen 12:3 when God promised Abraham that he would "bless those who bless you."

Joseph was an administrator in charge of Potiphar's possessions and the other servants of his household.

Joseph said in Gen 39:9 that committing adultery would be a sin against God. In addition, adultery is often committed in secret and only God knows about it. Joseph recognized that God takes marriage seriously, and he had clear ideas about the moral standards of his father's God.

Joseph avoided Potiphar's wife as much as possible.

Genesis 39:11 begins with "One day," a discourse feature that suggests going about normal business. Joseph was not entering the house with any ulterior motives, as a few scholars have tried to interpret the passage. He was simply doing his work as he always did.

Genesis 39:19 does not make it clear with whom Potiphar was furious. At first, it seems that Potiphar believed his wife's story, but then we see that he does not have Joseph immediately executed.

Joseph's punishment was not very severe for his crime. Convicted rapists would normally receive the death penalty. Egyptian law stated

that men who tried to commit adultery should be punished with 1000 blows, and attempted rape was to be punished even more severely. Some commentators imply that Potiphar was not fully convinced of his wife's total innocence.

Scholars believe that the prison warden would have been under the authority of Potiphar himself. Although Potiphar's name is not mentioned in Gen 40, it is most likely that the captain of the guard refers to Potiphar, and that the "prison" was actually a room attached to Potiphar's house—a type of house arrest. This place may be where important prisoners, such as Joseph and the chiefs of the cupbearers and bakers, would be held.

The cupbearer and the baker were most concerned not with the dreams themselves, but with the absence of the dream interpreter. Pharaoh would have had professional dream interpreters to whom they would have had access had they not been in prison.

"Go ahead and tell me your dream" was a customary formula that professional dream interpreters would have said to the dreamer. Joseph not only gave God the credit for the ability, but he used appropriate cultural forms to communicate.

There are two types of dreams in the Bible—auditory and visual. Visual dreams are the most unnerving to the recipient, perhaps because they are not self-interpretive.

The name Yahweh does not appear in this chapter as it did in Gen 39. When the name Yahweh does appear, it is by the narrator. When Joseph is speaking to a non-Hebrew, he uses the more general (and perhaps more culturally appropriate?) title for God—Elohim.

The tension in the story line introduced by the forgetfulness of the cupbearer is good storytelling, but it also underscores that Joseph was not going to get out of prison by any means other than an act of God.

Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sold into slavery. We know that he was thirty when he became ruler of Egypt. Therefore, when he interpreted the dreams of the two men in prison, he would have been twenty-eight. He spent thirteen years in Egypt before he became ruler.

Characters

Jacob

Jacob was Abraham's grandson and Isaac's son. He cheated his brother out of his birthright and later stole his father's blessing from his brother. Jacob's father-in-law cheated him by deceiving him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, whom he loved. After Jacob married Rachel, he showed favor to Rachel. She was Joseph's mother. Jacob had twelve sons, with Joseph being the second to the youngest and born to Jacob when he was an old man.

Joseph

Joseph was probably around seventeen years old when this story begins, so be sure to use an appropriate word for a young man of that age. He often tended his father's flocks.

Traders

The traders were most likely Ishmaelites (a general term for Bedouin nomads) who were specifically Midianites (the specific term for an ethnic group). Although some scholars attribute the two group titles to two different sources for the story, most modern scholars believe that the Ishmaelites and Midianites mentioned in this passage are meant to be understood as one and the same group. The different names all describe people groups descended from Abraham (Gen 16:15; 25:2) and are all similar in appearance and culture. The brothers were with the flocks at Dothan, along a major trade route leading to the Jezreel Valley. This may explain the presence of traders along the route.

Potiphar

Potiphar's name means "He whom the god [Re] has given or devoted to the sun [Re]." He most likely lived in the province closest to the border of Canaan. He is an officer of the king of Egypt, but it is unclear exactly what this officer does. Most scholars believe that he oversaw those who protected the king, even more specifically perhaps the chief of the executioners.

Potiphar's wife

God

In this story, God is indirectly involved as he is constantly mentioned as being "with Joseph." He is even recognized by Potiphar as Yahweh, although Egyptians did not worship Yahweh.

Two servants

The cupbearer was an official who prepared the king's drinks and gave them to him. We see from other passages as well (Nehemiah) that cupbearers often had influence over the king. Both the cupbearer and the baker were described as chiefs, meaning that they were the chiefs of several others who did the same job but were of lower rank.

Key Terms

Robe

The item of clothing that Jacob made for Joseph is a coat or long robe (tunic) worn by a man or a woman. The Hebrew adjective connected to the "robe" has been translated in several ways, and there is some discussion as to the correct meaning of the word. The Septuagint translates it as "multi-colored," but others say it refers to the length of the arms or robe, and still others say it was an adjective used for items that were status symbols of royalty or those of high status. If it was truly multi-colored, it was probably pieces of colored cloth sewn together rather than colors woven together into one piece. We know that it must have been a special, aesthetically beautiful robe. Whatever the case, the gift of the robe served to alien-

ate Joseph further from his brothers. Some typical translations are “a very pretty coat with long arms” and “a special long jacket with full sleeves.”³

Cistern

Cisterns are bottle-shaped holes in the ground, with a vertical narrow shaft and a narrow top covered by a rock. They caught rainwater. The sides were waterproofed by a plaster made of burnt and slaked lime. It would have been almost impossible for Joseph to escape. This cistern was empty, and the story should reflect that.

God

This is the only section of the Joseph narrative in which God’s name “Yahweh” is used—and that by the narrator, not by any of the characters themselves. Unless you are differentiating the Israelites’ special name for God in your stories, use the same term that you have been using for God throughout your stories.

Bless

In this context, “bless” refers to doing good to someone and specifically to helping them prosper. When God blessed Potiphar’s household, it was most likely materially and financially. If you need to describe this rather than use a religious term for bless that may have a different meaning, you may do so.

Hebrew

Choose how you describe Joseph’s ethnicity. You may just say “foreign,” unless you need to begin establishing the title you will give to the Israelites.

Sin

Sin refers to an act of disobedience to God. Be sure that the word you use here does not mean that someone has failed to perform a religious act (i.e., alms, ritual prayer, following religious dietary rules, etc.). If necessary, you can use “disobedience.”

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

³ William David Rebyrn and Euan McGregor Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 848.

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Story Guide 7

Joseph the Servant Leader

Genesis 41-50

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. His master's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. God was with Joseph even in prison. God interpreted dreams of fellow prisoners and servants of the king through Joseph. As predicted in a dream, one of the servants was released! Joseph said to him, "Please tell the king about me." The man said, "I will!" But the man forgot all about Joseph.

Two years later, the king had dreams that he did not understand. He asked all his wise men and magicians, but none of them knew what the dreams meant. Finally, the servant from the prison remembered Joseph. He said, "I had a dream in jail two years ago, and there was a man who could interpret my dream. Maybe he can interpret yours?" The king sent for Joseph, and when he arrived, the king told Joseph the dream. Joseph said, "I can't interpret dreams. Only God can." Joseph told the king what his dream meant. He said, "You will have seven years of great harvests, but then you will have seven years of famine. During the years of plenty, you will need to gather all the food you can and store it so you will have some during the years of famine. The king heard this and said, "Who is like this Joseph who has the spirit of God on him?" The king put Joseph in charge of gathering and storing the food to get ready for the famine. In fact, he made Joseph second-in-command of all of Egypt. God helped Joseph then too. For seven years Joseph stored the harvests. Then the famine began just as Joseph had predicted.

The famine spread past Egypt and even into the homeland where Joseph's father and brothers lived. Joseph's family ran out of food. Jacob said, "I heard that there's food in Egypt." He told his older sons, "Go to Egypt to buy food." When they arrived, they were brought in front of Joseph himself. When they were brought into the room, Joseph recognized his brothers immediately. The brothers did not recognize him! Joseph looked and dressed like an Egyptian. He spoke the Egyptian language. His brothers made two trips for food. Both times, Joseph gave them food. As they were talking to him, the brothers explained that their father was still alive and they had another brother. Joseph became very emotional.

The second time they came, he sent all the servants out of the room, and he began to weep so loudly everyone in the palace could hear him. He faced his brothers, and in their language, he said, "It is I, it's Joseph, the one you sold into slavery. I didn't die."

When his brothers recognized Joseph, they were frightened. Later Joseph told his brothers, "Don't be afraid. You meant to harm me. But God has used what has happened for good. Not just for me, but so that many people can be saved. Now go back to our country, get our father, all your families, and come back to Egypt to live with me." That's what his brothers did—they went back to their homeland and told Jacob, "Your son is alive." They brought their families, cattle, and livestock, and went back to Egypt to live with Joseph.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The Joseph epic continued. Joseph had seemingly been forgotten in prison for a crime he did not commit. Joseph endured thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment. Scripture is silent on how Joseph spent these last two years in prison after the cupbearer returned to the palace. The Lord was with Joseph, and his master Potiphar observed this (Gen 39:3). Joseph served his fellow prisoners, and they approached him about troubling dreams. Joseph explained only God could do that, and he allowed God to speak through him (Gen 40:8).

We get a glimpse of Joseph's heart again once he appeared before Pharaoh. When given an audience with the king, who was considered a god, Joseph did not beg for his freedom. He did not attempt to leverage for a future position. Rather than boasting of his ability, Joseph re-

sponded with biblical faith. He trusted God with the outcome. He testified that only God could interpret the dreams correctly (Gen 41:16).

Joseph modeled abiding with God regardless of the circumstance. This is a stark contrast to prosperity doctrine, which tells you, no matter your circumstances, you deserve better. Prosperity theology defines faith differently. "The Faith movement, as the name suggests, marched under the banner of Faith, [which is] now defined as the power to actualize reality."¹ This prosperity faith is also characterized by practitioners by its focus on man-centered theology. Health, wealth, and victory are the consistent message. While this definition stems from the American prosperity movement, the prosperity gospel has been indigenized around the world.²

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God Chose Abraham – God chose a childless man, Abraham, to bless the nations through his descendants. This was one of many times when God chose someone who was not an obvious candidate to carry forward God's plan. But Abraham believed God, and God kept his promises. God chose Jacob even though Jacob took advantage of his brother and deceived his father, Isaac. God brought good out of Jacob's conniving. Eventually Jacob trusted God.

Joseph the Dreamer – God chose Joseph, one of Jacob's youngest sons, even though Joseph did not appear likely to continue God's redemptive plan. God kept his promises to Abraham even though Joseph was rebuked by his father and brothers for dreaming that they would bow to him one day. Joseph was treated unjustly again and again. But God was with Joseph. Joseph believed God brought good out of the evil that his brothers did to him. God saved many people through Joseph.

Moses Chose True Prosperity – God showed that he remained in relationship with Abraham's descendants. Against all odds he worked through Abraham's descendant Moses, who had fled Egypt to avoid punishment for killing a man. God liberated his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses trusted God, and God worked through him to save them.

Jeremiah – Abraham's descendants were disobedient and suffered the consequences. But God was faithful to his covenant agreement with Abraham and Abraham's descendants. God brought good out of a sinful era. Jeremiah predicted that God would send a righteous king descended from Abraham and David who would rule with justice and save his people.

Birth of Jesus – The patriarch Joseph modeled servant leadership in difficult circumstances. Through his humility and God's provision, Joseph brought salvation to the descendants of Abraham during the worldwide famine. The birth of Jesus signals the offer of true salvation to the bloodline and adopted descendants of Abraham through humility and servant leadership.

¹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77.

² Bowler, *Blessed*, 245.

The writer of Hebrews centuries later defined faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1 ESV). Joseph continued to live out true prosperity by trusting in God as he managed the seven years of abundant harvests. Joseph must have felt an awesome weight of responsibility in handling the resources and preparing for the years of famine. Once again, he was directed by God. Joseph demonstrated his reliance on God when he forgave his brothers. His declaration of true faith, that God transformed the evil acts of his brothers into God’s good purposes, demonstrated a life walking in the trust of the Lord.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The repetition in Gen 40:23 underscores how totally the cupbearer forgot about Joseph.

The cupbearer spoke up when the magicians could not interpret the dream. He was probably present and overheard the king's conversation with them. If you need to make that explicit in the story, you can. Regardless of whether the cupbearer intentionally did not tell the Pharaoh about Joseph, he wanted the Pharaoh to think he unintentionally forgot (Gen 41:9).

Both the cupbearer and Joseph addressed Pharaoh in third person when they were speaking to him. This was the custom in that day to show respect. Be sure that your story reflects their respect for the king by using whatever discourse device your language would use when speaking to royalty.

It is interesting to note that the Pharaoh and Joseph did not share any normal forms of greeting or conversation when they met. Pharaoh immediately launched into his problem and his retelling of his dream. His retelling (Gen 41:17-24), unlike the narrator's (Gen 41:1-7), is full of personal interpretation and extra description, highlighting his anxiety about the dreams.

In the conversation between Joseph and Pharaoh, Joseph referred to God as a specific God. Pharaoh refers to God without an article, which indicates a general, all-inclusive god.

The details of Pharaoh's dreams have been summarized for the sake of brevity.

In Gen 41:26 the seven years of prosperity referred to seven years with plenty to eat, as opposed to the seven years of famine mentioned in Gen 41:27. You may need to make that explicit in the story.

The words "intelligent" and "wise" in Gen 41:33 referred to someone who has insight, understanding, knowledge, and sound judgment.

The overseers in Gen 41:34-35 were other, more local officials.

Joseph did not store the grain himself. Rather, he had others do the work.

The narrative contrasts the brothers' lack of discernment in recognizing Joseph (although it would be a difficult job because he would have looked so different) with Joseph's discernment in recognizing them even before they speak.

Some parts of the story have been summarized to keep the story short and easy to retell. However, you may need to make this story even shorter if you find that it is difficult to retell.

Joseph dismissed the servants in the Egyptian language. He spoke in his native language when he revealed himself to his brothers. This is the climax of the entire Joseph narrative, and you should use appropriate discourse markers and body language to show this.

After Joseph revealed himself, he asked again, "Is my father still alive?" He wanted to make sure that the earlier information was correct, and this repetition was normal in that culture's discourse. Joseph's discourse revealed his (like Judah's) emphasis on his father's well-being.

Background Information

Historical

In those days some magicians and wise men had "dream books" in which sample dreams and the keys to their interpretation were kept. Joseph's reference to God alone being the interpreter stood in stark contrast to the normal procedure of the day for interpreting dreams.

The brothers bowed to Joseph, as was expected in that culture, as an appropriate greeting for someone in authority.

The journey from Hebron Valley to Goshen would have been around 300 miles. It would

have probably taken around two weeks to travel that distance, depending on the number of family members and animals traveling with them.

We know that the time between the brothers' first visit and second visit could not have been more than two years, because Joseph tells his brothers, when he reveals himself to them, that there are five more years of famine remaining.

When the brothers ate with Joseph, they ate at a separate table. Hebrews were not permitted to eat with Egyptians, and Joseph continued his facade. Ironically, Joseph ate alone at a table as well because the Egyptians would not have eaten with him.

Goshen was a land on the eastern edge of the Nile delta and was a favorable environment for herdsmen. It is also conveniently a little separated from the rest of the main Egyptian population, as Egyptians did not like shepherds. This is where Jacob and his sons lived when they arrived in Egypt.

Biblical

We do not know if the two years in Gen 41:1 refers to the total time that Joseph was in prison or the amount of time that had passed from the time the two servants had their dreams. It most likely refers to the amount of time between the dreams and Joseph coming before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh had two similar dreams. The presence of two dreams like this underscored the validity of and the divine source of the dreams' message.

Genesis 41:8 indicates that Pharaoh's magicians could not tell him the meaning of the dreams. The dreams seem fairly obvious, possibly indicating that the magicians did not want to share the bad news with Pharaoh. Perhaps they did, and Pharaoh did not believe them. Story crafters should not speculate about these points in the narrative.

In Gen 41:14, Joseph shaved and changed his clothes. Although Hebrews probably preferred to be bearded, Egyptians did not. This action may indicate Joseph's desire to be as pleasant to the Pharaoh as possible.

The Egyptians worshiped Pharaoh as a god incarnate. Yet in Gen 41:16 Joseph was again modest about his own powers to interpret dreams. He attributed those skills to God alone. He seems to have no fear in talking about his God in front of Pharaoh. It should be noted that Joseph does address Pharaoh in the appropriate respectful terms, as seen in the original Hebrew.

"You will be in charge of my court" possibly means that Joseph became prime minister/vizier. It is more likely that Joseph was in charge of the estates of the Pharaoh.

Joseph was also given an Egyptian name so that he would be fully integrated into Egyptian society and accepted. We do not know the meaning of his name, but it may mean something like "the god has spoken, and he will live," or "the one who knows."

Some have wondered why Joseph was content to settle in Egypt without seeming to try to get word to his father about his good fortune. The Hebrew names he gave his two sons (Gen 41:50-52) seem to imply that he had left his past totally behind. Manasseh means "God has made me forget all my suffering," and Ephraim means "God has made me fruitful." However, Gen 41:53-57 seems to bring Joseph's family back in the picture. The way the narrative is constructed here would imply that Joseph had not forsaken his family.

This story takes the listener back to the family dynamic from Gen 37. The brothers took a trip together. There is a favored son and an unpleasant report to give to the father in this story as well. However, in this part of the story the brothers seem to be changing, and they recognize God's actions in their situation.

Jacob asked his married sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. As a father in that culture, he retained authority over them even into adulthood.

Benjamin did not travel with the brothers. He was not married at the time, but in addition, he was the only remaining son of Rachel after Joseph left. Rachel was Jacob's favored wife who died in childbirth with Benjamin. If your audience needs to hear this piece of information to more fully understand why Jacob was so protective, you may include it in the story.

The brothers arrived and bowed down to Joseph, the administrator of the grain—just as Joseph's two dreams had suggested. The sun, moon, and stars had bowed representing his authority, and the sheaves had bowed representing his position as provider to the brothers.

In Gen 42:8 the brothers do not recognize Joseph, but he recognized them even before they spoke. The brothers probably did not recognize him because Joseph looked Egyptian. Most likely clean shaven (unlike them) and dressed in Egyptian clothing, he spoke to them through an interpreter. More importantly, the brothers assumed Joseph was dead. They would never be expecting to see him again.³

Although the brothers were telling the truth when they said they were not spies, ironically, they were certainly not the honest men they claimed themselves to be.

Joseph used an interpreter to maintain his undercover role. At no other time in Genesis was an interpreter used when someone spoke to Pharaoh.

To keep the story short, we have not included in this story the brother's dialogue with Joseph or that Joseph had the money put back in the sacks. However, you may choose to include this if you wish. We do not know the motivation for putting the money back in the sacks. It could

have been pure love for the brothers. It could have been a test to see if they would take the money and forget about their brother left in prison in Egypt.

In Gen 43 the brothers returned to Egypt and went to Joseph's palace. We have not included that they bowed before him when they saw him—just as Joseph's boyhood dream predicted. If that would be appropriate in the storyteller's culture, then add that detail to the story.

Joseph treated Benjamin kindly, blessed him, and gave him larger portions of the meal. We omitted that from this story, but you may include it if it is important for your audience. Joseph's feast for his brothers was reminiscent of Jesus's parable of the prodigal son in which the father celebrated the return of his wayward son. Joseph did everything a good host in those times would do. Joseph provided the feast as a welcome, but the brothers were frightened, thinking it was a trap.

The Hebrew narrative about the meal implied a jovial occasion—literally saying that the brothers got drunk with Joseph. It may be most culturally appropriate in some places to omit that from the story.

At the beginning of Gen 45, Joseph wept. If this action is significant in your culture, be sure to include it. Joseph wept three times in this story, although we have not included it each time. If weeping shows compassion and would show Joseph in a favorable light, you may include it in your story.

When Joseph asked the Egyptians to leave the room, he was signaling that he was again his brothers' brother—a Hebrew like them. The absence of his servants allowed him to open up emotionally. He probably began to speak Hebrew at this time to prove to his brothers that it was really him.

³ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary v. 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2005), 776.

In Gen 45:5 Joseph said, “Do not be angry with yourselves” meaning that the brothers should not blame themselves or take fault onto themselves for what they had done.

The point in the Joseph narrative where Joseph saw God’s purposes in what had happened brings together the family history with the national history of the Israelites, but it also includes a divine dimension. Joseph acknowledged the overarching hand of God beyond the basic history of the events that had occurred when he said that God sent him ahead of them to preserve their lives.

Genesis 50:1 describes Joseph’s emotional reaction when Jacob died. If this description is important to include to show that Joseph respected his father, you may incorporate it in your story. The example narrative simply states, “later.”

In many cultures, “forgiveness” extends only until the patriarch has died. It was a common practice to extract vengeance after the death of the family leader. Taking this into account, it is understandable that the brothers would again be worried.

The brothers’ concern manifested itself in their hesitation to go directly to Joseph—instead they sent a message. However, even before Joseph could answer, they followed it up with a personal appearance. You may need to discuss ways in which people in your culture confront and deal with people they are afraid of.

The brothers were not known for their honesty, especially in regard to their father. They lied to their father in Gen 37 about Joseph’s demise. It is very possible that they are lying here about what Jacob did or did not say. In fact, we have no evidence that Jacob ever discovered what the brothers did to Joseph so many years before. They also called themselves Joseph’s slaves—all possibly an attempt to gain favor. However, if your language has truth discourse markers, you should give the brothers the

benefit of the doubt and assume that they were telling the truth because we have no biblical proof otherwise.

Joseph broke down and wept again. We are not told the reason for his weeping. One can postulate that it may be because that even after all these years, the brothers still do not understand the forgiveness they received. They may have been living with a secret fear of what would happen when their father died.

Joseph did not use the words “I forgive you.” For him, that already happened and did not need to happen again. Instead, he expressed his forgiveness in action. His brothers had no need to fear. He would take care of them. In many cultures, forgiveness is an abstract concept that needs to be expressed in action. The story crafter should take that into consideration. What would you do if you wanted to forgive someone who had wronged you in your culture? How would you treat them?

Joseph refused to put himself in the place of God to judge his brothers. He again submitted to God’s purposes for his life rather than interfere with them.

Characters

Jacob

Jacob was Abraham’s grandson and Isaac’s son. He cheated his brother out of his birthright and later stole his father’s blessing from his brother. Jacob’s father-in-law cheated him into marrying Leah even though he loved Rachel. After he married Rachel also, he showed favor to Rachel, who later became Joseph’s mother. Jacob had twelve sons. Joseph was the second to the youngest.

Joseph

Joseph was probably around seventeen years old when this story begins, so be sure to use an appropriate word for a young man of that age. He often tended his father’s flocks.

Traders

The traders were most likely Ishmaelites (a general term for Bedouin nomads) who were specifically Midianites (the specific term for an ethnic group). Although some scholars attribute the two group titles to two different sources for the story, most modern scholars believe that the Ishmaelites and Midianites mentioned in this passage are meant to be understood as the same group. The different names all describe people groups descended from Abraham (Gen 16:15; 25:2) and are all similar in appearance and culture. The brothers were with the flocks at Dothan, along a major trade route leading to the Jezreel Valley. This may explain the presence of traders along the route.

God

In this story, God is indirectly involved as he is constantly mentioned as being “with Joseph.” He is even recognized by Potiphar as Yahweh, although the Egyptians did not worship Yahweh.

Two servants

The cupbearer was an official who prepared the king’s drinks and gave them to him. We see from other passages as well (Nehemiah) that cupbearers often had influence over the king. Both the cupbearer and the baker were described as chiefs, meaning that they were the chiefs of several others who did the same job but were of lower rank.

King of Egypt

The name of the Pharaoh is never mentioned in the Genesis accounts, perhaps because Egyptians believed him to be a god. The Israelites placed great emphasis on names, so they would not have wanted to invoke that kind of name as they told this story.

King’s magicians

Some versions of the Bible translate the title “magician” as dream-interpreter, but that was not their only function. These men were a type of Egyptian priest who had special powers and knowledge. If using a term related to shaman or witch doctor does not seem acceptable for

cultural reasons (although it would be an accurate term), you can simply use “priest.”

Wise men

Wise men were another form of priest. They were believed to have special knowledge. These two groups of men formed the group of the king’s scholars and advisors.

Key Terms

Forgive

The Hebrew word for forgive in Gen 50:17 is literally translated as “lift up.” The brothers are asking Joseph to lift or remove their sin. Some languages do not have an adequate word for “forgive.” If that is the case, understanding what “forgiveness” means is imperative to translating it correctly. Forgiveness involves two people, one of whom has done something wrong to the other and offended him. The one who was offended sets aside his rights and does not punish the other as he deserves. He does not seek revenge. If the other repents of his behavior and accepts the forgiveness, the relationship between the two is restored, and guilt removed. With God, forgiveness is available to all. It is dependent on a penitent heart, in that the person stops his actions and turns toward God with an attitude of faith and repentance. This results in a restored relationship between God and man. Below are some idioms used in the New Testament to describe “forgiveness.” Your language may have a similar idiom, and if so, you may use that to create a word picture for your audience.

to wipe away the sins of someone

to lift up the sins of someone

to loose, release

to throw away

to cover over

to pass by

to take away

to turn one’s back on

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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Story Guide 8

Moses Chose True Prosperity

Exodus 1-14; Acts 7:23; Hebrews 11:24-25

Eventually Joseph, the king of Egypt whom he served, and that generation died. God multiplied the numbers of Abraham's descendants, Joseph's people. They are called Israelites or Hebrews. A new king feared a takeover by these Hebrews and made them slaves to the Egyptians. They suffered many generations of slavery. The king of Egypt even ordered all the baby boys of the Hebrew slaves to be killed. But God heard the cries of his people. One mother saved her baby boy by sending him in a basket down the river where the daughter of the king found him. She adopted the baby and named him Moses. Moses grew up in the palace. He had the best education. He lived the rich and powerful life of a prince.

From time to time, Moses left the palace and saw his fellow Hebrew people suffering from the heavy work. One day Moses saw an Egyptian severely beating one of the Hebrew slaves. When he thought no one was looking, Moses killed the Egyptian and hid the dead body. The next day when Moses was out, he saw a Hebrew slave beating another Hebrew slave. Moses asked, "Why are you beating your brother?" The man said, "Who made you judge among us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?" Everyone knew what Moses had done. Even the king knew. Moses ran away from Egypt. **He left his life of riches and power.**

Moses fled east. He married and became a shepherd for his father-in-law. One day Moses was out with the animals, and he saw a bush on fire, but it was not burning up. When he went to see the bush, God called out to him. "Moses, Moses do not come any closer! Take off your sandals. You are standing on holy ground." Then the LORD told Moses, "I have heard the cries of my people. I will send you back to the king, and you will bring my people out of Egypt and slavery." Moses asked God, "Who should I say is sending me?" God told him his personal name, Yahweh, and said to tell them that Yahweh will lead them back to the land he had promised their ancestors. So Moses obeyed. He returned to Egypt to lead God's people to freedom.

God sent a series of ten plagues on the Egyptian people that were so severe, the king allowed the Hebrew slaves to leave. Moses led God's people out of Egypt and toward the promised land. The Egyptian army later pursued them, but God provided their escape by parting the water at the Red Sea. When the Egyptian army tried to follow them, God then closed the water. All the soldiers and their animals were destroyed.

In the desert God provided food and water for his people. He protected them from their enemies. As God led them, he guided them with a cloud during the day and then fire in the cloud at night. God lived among his people.

This is the story about Moses's choice of leaving the life of a prince to be a humble servant of God.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The Moses epic is foundational across the Abrahamic faiths. The Qur'an mentions Nabi Musa, (Arabic for "the prophet Moses"), the messenger, more often than it does the prophet Mohammed. In the Jewish tradition, "Moshe (Moses) is arguably the greatest figure in Judaism other than God."¹ In the Christian faith, Moses as a deliverer foreshadows the ultimate deliverer, Jesus Christ. Moses is a forerunner pointing to the Savior to come as the mediator of covenants, priest, prophet, shepherd, and servant leader (Exod 3; 19:3-9; Deut 34:10; John 1:17; 6:14; 10; Acts 3:22; Heb 3:1-6; 8:6-7; 9:11-12; 10:11-12).

Born to enslaved parents, Moses survived the infanticide ordered by the fanatical king. The king's daughter discovered the baby floating in a basket near where she was bathing and adopted him. Moses grew up in the palace. He received the best education in classical Egyptian subjects and military strategy. Moses was prepared to live a life of high public office in the most powerful country in the world at that time (Gen 37-50; Exod 1-2).

The first turning point in the life of Moses came when he saw firsthand the abuse his people endured daily. He observed an Egyptian master beating Moses's fellow Hebrew. Should he look the other way to maintain his comfortable life of wealth and power? Moses chose to intervene on behalf of his kindred Hebrew. He thus put in motion a series of events that transformed his life from a prince of Egypt to a shepherd for his soon-to-be father-in-law. Moses was often the object of ridicule and scorn by both the Egyptian king and the Israelite people. Ultimately Moses chose to leave a life of riches and power to obey what God called him to do (Exodus 2-20; Heb 11:24-25).

Moses's choices are counterintuitive to prosperity gospel advocates. Prosperity and word of faith proponents preach a man-centered theology that consistently focuses on personal wealth, health, and success. Moses, however, defended a slave to the extent that his action led to the downfall of his prosperous future.

Yahweh revealed himself to Moses when Moses was a humble shepherd and called Moses to a challenging future of obedience. Moses's palace became a tent in the desert. His chariot became sturdy sandals and a walking stick. Prosperity theology promises adherents their best life now, in this life. Moses demonstrates to us his best life was a life of obedience and service rather than riches, pleasure, and power. Moses now enjoys his best life with God for eternity.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God Chose Abraham – Like Abraham, Moses is God's chosen leader to serve his special people. God shows he is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – The story of Moses and his close relationship with God continued.

Birth of Jesus – There were many similarities in the lives of Moses and Jesus. Two examples were the infanticide following their births and being in the roles of deliverer and mediator with God. Both gave up a life of royal status to intercede for God's people.

Cost of Following – There is no promise that life as an obedient follower will be easy. Moses encountered challenges and disappointments. But Moses embraced the difficulties as he walked with God. Moses chose to leave a life of luxury to be a servant leader. Moses chose to live in a tent in the desert, with God near, rather than in a palace. Jesus told his followers to expect hardship, too.

Call to Suffer – Moses chose to suffer in a servant leader position rather than live a life of luxury in the palace. Moses had an encounter at the burning bush that changed the trajectory of his life. Moses knew that walking with God was more precious than any amount of earthly wealth.

¹ My Jewish Learning, "Moses in the Bible and Beyond," 2002, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/moses-in-the-bible-beyond/>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Chapters 1 and 2 of Exodus are considered by scholars to be an introduction for the remaining 38 chapters of the book. The writer prepares his audience for an epic of a people set apart by God, their multiplication, and a prophecy about their suffering. The suffering became their reality, culminating in deliverance and establishment of a covenant between a holy God and his people. While Moses is a central character, the LORD is the hero of this narrative.

Just as God had instructed the first man and woman in the garden to multiply and thrive (Gen 1:28), God blessed the descendants of Abraham in this way. At Joseph's invitation to move to Egypt, his seventy male relatives with their female and child dependents left Canaan under Joseph's invitation to survive the worldwide famine (Gen 46-48). Note that our story intentionally connects Abraham to his great-grandson Joseph. This continues the theme that the Lord God has set apart a special people for himself.

A new king ascended to the throne of Egypt. The miraculous intervention through Joseph no longer influenced the kingdom. The familiar title of the monarch of Egypt, Pharaoh, means great house. In this series of stories, we are simply using the term "king." This is a much better understood term. Using "king" is preferable to expecting audiences to use a transliteration of the term Pharaoh in their heart language. With the multiplication of the Hebrew people, the new king feared a coup d'état or military takeover from the foreigners, the Israelites.

We have introduced the name of the descendants of Abraham as Israelites or Hebrews. We strongly encourage storytellers to be aware of their audience in deciding the term to which to refer to the descendants of Abraham. The audience also may have strong anti-Semitic

prejudices and be more open to the general term "descendants of Abraham." The ultimate audience may also be unchurched or have little biblical background.

Caution is strongly advised to storytellers not to fall into the pattern of thinking, "Oh everyone knows the words *Pharaoh, Israelites and Hebrews*" as well as other key biblical terms. While an audience may have heard of these terms, they may not necessarily know the correct biblical definition, or they may have prejudices.

Exodus 1:10: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and take possession of the land" [author translation]. Versions such as the NLT, ESV, and TEV have rendered this verse as "escape from the country." Douglas Stuart explains in the New American Commentary why he believes the phrase means "take possession," which fits the context. It is rendered that way in the NRSV. In the crafted story, we have rendered it "a takeover."²

Genesis 15:13 states the LORD told Abram that his descendants will be afflicted and enslaved for 400 years in a foreign land. Exodus 12:40-41 says that at the end of 430 years the Israelites left Egypt. Exodus 1:9-12 further complicates determining exactly how many years passed between the time of Joseph and Moses's life. There is much conjecture by scholars. In the crafting of this story, we have opted to render it "suffered many generations" to reveal the span of time while being accurate and reproducible.

Our introduction for this story summarizes the Lord's concern for his people by saying God heard their cries, not just the emotional groaning but their prayers too as the context supports. Extensive volumes are available regarding the life of Moses. This story focuses

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary v. 2 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 64.

on Moses's choice of obedience and service rather than a life of riches and power that prosperity gospel advocates hold so closely.

The King ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the Hebrew baby boys at birth, but they feared God more (Exod 1:17). The King then commanded the Egyptian population to participate in the infanticide (Exod 1:22). For reasons of brevity, the details are not included but rather communicate the imminent threat the baby Moses and his family were under. While the papyrus reeds are interesting detail, this detail is a bit too specific to the Nile delta thus the crafted story mentions a basket made waterproof. The proper name Nile is left out of the story as not all audiences would recognize the name.

Pharaoh is consistently rendered "king" with the princess rendered as "the king's daughter" in the story. She would have been accompanied by servants while at the river's edge. Like many places in Africa, women would be found down by the river washing clothes, bathing children, or themselves. The river would have been the logical area to find compassionate women potentially willing to care for this baby.

The princess found the child and named him Moses. Scholars explain that this name is a play on words using both the Egyptian and Hebrew languages meaning "pulling him out of water."

Luke writes in Acts 7:22-23 that Stephen elaborates on Moses's education. Moses learned all that the Egyptians had to offer, which would have included military strategy. This education groomed Moses for high political office.

The transition point in this story is made explicit. The Acts 7 reference tells us that Moses was forty when he had an encounter with a slave master abusing Moses's fellow Hebrew. Moses had left the security of the palace and come face to face with the reality of the servitude of his kinsmen at the heavy hands of the Egyp-

tians. There is disagreement in Bible translations. Some say that the Egyptian taskmaster killed the Hebrew slave, but the ESV, NLT, NASB, and RSV conclude that the word refers to a beating. Moses killed the Egyptian, then quickly hid the body in a shallow grave, thinking no one would see him.

The next day, Moses questions a Hebrew slave why he was beating his fellow Hebrew slave. The rhetorical question shows us that even his own people were rejecting Moses. Even though he was attempting to do the right thing, it was not always appreciated or accepted.

The writer of Hebrews 11 points out that this was when Moses made his choice to leave the lifestyle of a prince to rediscover his Hebrew roots. Moses travels east toward the land of his ancestors. Moses arrived in the area known as Midian in the Arabian Peninsula bordering the Gulf of Aqaba. The name of this area is not widely known nor is it repeated in subsequent stories; thus, it is not specifically mentioned in the story.

For the sake of brevity, the details of meeting the women and Jethro are not included in this story.

The pace of the story accelerates with Moses getting married. His marriage established him in this new land where he cared for the animals of his father-in-law. The animals would have most likely included sheep, goats, and possibly cattle. We have used the generic term "animals" in this story rather than "flock" because that term can often bring to mind sheep only.

The iconic scene of Moses seeing a burning bush, made famous in film, is rendered in this story as being not burned up. Many texts use the word "consumed" in Exod 3:2, then unpack it by Moses saying, "as not burning up," in verse 3. In the Hebrew text, it literally says, "burning with flame, without being eaten."³

³ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 55.

One objective of this story is to focus on Moses's choice of leaving his life as a prince of Egypt to identify as an ethnic Hebrew. In God's due time, Moses followed the LORD's commands as directed.

For the sake of brevity, not all the details of the encounter are shared in this story. The two commands God gave Moses, not to come any closer and to remove his shoes, have been retained to add this salient detail and to show God's set-apart holiness. Moses is no one apart from this turning point, this theophany encounter. The name "I am Who I am" has not been included because testing has shown this is not a reproducible detail by a non-churched audience.

In the text we see Moses asking the name of the God who is sending him to Egypt. God replies אֲנִי אֶשֶׁר אֲנִי (אֲנִי) "I am Yahweh your God," "I am he," "I am first, also I am last."⁴ Note the line in the crafted version of the story, "God told him his personal name." It is a phrase added to fill in the contextual gap that the audience may not realize is being addressed.

The conclusion of this story summarizes the series of events including the plagues on Egypt and the ultimate release of the Hebrew captives from slavery. The parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh and his army are summarized as a miracle.

God himself was with his people in the form of a pillar or column of a cloud. Scholars point out "it is clear that there was only one cloud-like pillar, which represented God's presence, and that it appeared as a great column of dark cloud when viewed during the bright sunlit day but as a column of fire when viewed at night"⁵ (Exod 13:21).

Pro tip: Be advised that the ubiquitous Hollywood film, *The Ten Commandments*, often influences audiences across Africa. People will often retell the story with details from the film rather than the biblical story.

Background Information

Historical

There is much scholarly debate on the exact period of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt. Likewise, there is also much discussion on the name of the Pharaoh. Scripture is silent on the topic. Scholars think this was intentional so as not to propagate the idea of deity status by naming him. In this way the biblical writers reduced the most powerful person in the known world to his office.

It is not known exactly when Joseph became the vizier, the second-highest office in the land after the king. Scholars contend it was during the time of the Hyksos pharaohs, 1750 to 1550 BC. The Hyksos kings were foreign invaders who had conquered Egypt. Eventually, the Hyksos rulers lost the kingdom and xenophobia became the standard. Consequently, there was little tolerance for resident aliens with an exploding population.

The new pharaoh enslaved the Israelites in the geographical area where the garrison cities of Pithom and Rameses were built (Exod 1:11). The modern cities of Retebe and Qantir in Egypt may be these ancient garrison cities. The great pyramids of Giza as well as other pyramids in Egypt were built approximately 1,000 years earlier. One should not think that the Israelite slaves built the great pyramids, despite popular Hollywood depictions.

"Ancient Egyptians believed in a close relationship between the name of a deity and the deity itself. That is, the name of a god could

⁴ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Bible Commentary 3 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Incorporated, 1987), 31.

⁵ Stuart, *Exodus*, 327.



reveal part of the essential nature of that god.”⁶ Moses, educated as an Egyptian, would have known to ask this intuitive question of God, “What is your name?” He knew the Egyptians would want to know this information. Exodus 3:13 suggests that Moses expected the Israelites to ask as well.

Biblical

Joseph’s family settled in the northeast delta region of Egypt known as Goshen. This is the area where the king at the time assigned them to live. The area had the best grazing for the herds of animals that the Israelites had brought from Canaan (Gen 47).

In the new land where the descendants of Abraham had relocated, they were flourish-

ing and living out the blessing God had given Adam and Eve in the garden and having many children (Gen 1:28). The Egyptian king sought population control through harsh slavery conditions as well as the orders to the Hebrew midwives to kill the boy babies. In that way he could eliminate this people group in one or two generations.

Moses would have had the best available education in the world at that time. It would have included science, astronomy, medicine, and mathematics. It would have also included military strategy and training.

Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian (Exod 2:15). The fourth son of Abraham, born by his wife Keturah, was named

⁶ John H Walton, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament) v. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 175.

Midian (Gen 25:2). It is there Moses met his future in-laws.

As Moses fled Egypt, he came to a certain well (Exod 2:15). A water well in the Sinai wilderness was an important resting point for travelers, traders, the nomads in this region, and their animals. We see Moses demonstrate his physical training when he defended the slave being beaten and later again when he fended off shepherds at the well, perhaps protecting his future wife.

“Mountain of God” in Exod 3:1 is widely rendered as “Horeb” but more often called “Mount Sinai” in other biblical passages for this mountain range. The names Sinai and Horeb reflect different traditions.

Exodus 3:2 employs the term “angel of the LORD (Yahweh).” This form of an angel is not to be confused with the angelic beings who serve God. This is the manifestation or representation of Yahweh that a human is allowed to see safely. Exodus 33:20 explains that no one is allowed to see God’s face and live. Other instances of the Angel of the LORD can be found in Gen 16:7-13 with Hagar, Gen 22:1-18 with Abraham and Isaac, and Judg 6:11-40 with Gideon. Academic commentaries have described it as akin to modern-day video conferencing in which you can see the person with whom you are speaking but not be in their physical presence.

Exodus 7-12 is a narration of the ten plagues or judgments that ultimately caused the release of the Israelite slaves. It is thought the Egyptians worshiped 1,500 gods. The preponderance of these gods was associated with nature and attempting to control it. Bryant points out that the ten plagues’ “point is to demonstrate the powerlessness of the Egyptian gods in contrast to the ultimate power of Yahweh.”⁷

Characters

God/Yahweh

The sacred private name YHWH has been considered by Jews too holy to even speak aloud lest they take his name in vain. So they say, “the Lord,” in place of YHWH. This tradition began after the Babylonian exile. Modern translators suggest that LORD is a title, not his name. While Yahweh is preferable throughout this story set, the term God has proven to be more reproducible in story testing. The name Yahweh does reflect the intimacy between God and his people.

Moses

King of Egypt

The name of the Pharaoh is never mentioned in Genesis accounts. Perhaps it is because Egyptians believed him to be a god, and the Israelites, placing great emphasis on names, would not have wanted to invoke that kind of name.

Descendants of Abraham, Jacob/Israelites/Hebrews

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. Jacob was renamed Israel by God, and thus the descendants were termed Israelites. In telling about the first forty years of Moses’s life, the Bible usually refers to the descendants of Abraham as “Hebrews” instead of “Israelites,” but it uses both terms. We have followed Scripture’s approach, choosing to use “Hebrews” primarily but not exclusively.

Key Terms

Burning Bush

This theophanic event begins subtly with a bush large enough for Moses to see from a distance. The word one chooses here for “bush” should be understood as (סִבְיָה **n.m.**) “a thorny bush, bramble.” Moses, as a shepherd, would

⁷ Dewayne Bryant, “Egypt, Religion of” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, John D. Barry, et al., eds. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Electronic edition.

always be scanning the landscape for threats to the flock. He would have noticed a bush that continued to burn but was not consumed. God spoke to Moses from the inside of the fire.⁸

Miracle

Exodus 3:20 tells us that God would implement miracles to bring about the release of his people. A miracle by definition is an event that defies any human ability to manipulate circumstances or nature as demonstrated by God's involvement. The word chosen for "miracle" cannot be a word used locally that would entail someone coercing an idol or god to act. It is a benevolent, loving action on the part of God.

Cloud

The word "cloud" is quite significant and should not be left out of the story. This cloud is different from the regular weather phenomena. This cloud holds a greater significance. "The Hebrew so rendered means 'a covering,' because clouds cover the sky. The word is used as a symbol of the divine presence, as indicating the splendor of that glory which it conceals (Exod 16:10; 33:9; Num 11:25; 12:5; Job 22:14; Ps 18:11)."⁹

Hebrew

Choose how you describe Joseph's ethnicity. You may just say "foreign," unless you need to begin establishing the name you will give to the Israelites.

God/Yahweh

God is the supreme being, and Yahweh, I AM, is the sacred private name YHWH. "The word for **I am** ('ehyeh) is the verb 'to be' in the first person singular; the name YHWH."¹⁰ It is a play on the words *I am*. YHWH has been considered by Jews too holy even to speak aloud lest they

take the LORD's name in vain as is forbidden in Exod 20:7. This practice started after the Babylonian exile. Hebrew speakers would say "adonay" (My Lord) instead. English translations more commonly use "the LORD" (in smaller capital letters) to translate YHWH. "Yahweh" is a transliteration of YHWH and is used in other translations.

The King James Version has rendered Yahweh as "Jehovah" which may have influenced older Bible translations. A transliteration of "Yahweh" in the local language is perhaps the best option. Responsible Bible translation teams carefully consider their decisions about how to translate the names and titles of God or whether to transliterate them. Thus, it may be helpful to study their choices.

⁸ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 702.

⁹ Matthew George Easton, "Cloud," In *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), Electronic edition.

¹⁰ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 68.

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Story Guide 9

Moses Interceded for God's Presence

Exodus 19-40

God delivered his people, the Israelites (or Hebrews), from slavery in Egypt through his servant Moses. When they arrived at Mount Sinai, God called Moses to the top of the mountain. He said, "You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians. If you, my people, will obey me and keep my sacred agreement, a covenant, you will be my own people, more precious to me than all other people on earth." Moses walked back down the mountain and told the people what God said. *All the people said, "We will do everything that the Lord has commanded!"*

Moses went back to the top of the mountain. God gave him the stone tablets with the ten commands, the terms of their sacred agreement, and many instructions. Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days.

Down at the camp, though, the people began to complain to Moses's brother Aaron, "What happened to that guy Moses? Make us new gods to lead us!" So Aaron made an idol in the shape of a golden calf. Many people began worshiping it and making sacrifices!

God knew all of this was going on and God was angry! He said to Moses, "The people are worshiping an idol. I will destroy them all and make you, Moses, a great nation!" But Moses pleaded, "Remember the oath you made to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." God relented.

When Moses came down the mountain, he was angry. He threw down the stone tablets with the commands and law and broke them. He destroyed the idol. He said, "The God of Israel says, 'Pick up your swords and kill the men who are committed to worshiping the idol and not God.'" That day 3,000 men were killed.

Moses went back up the mountain to beg God for forgiveness. God said, "Go! I will send my angel to drive out your enemies, but I am not going with you! If I go with you, I will destroy you!"

When the people heard these stern words from God, they were heartbroken.

Moses continued to speak to God on behalf of the people. God and Moses spoke as friends would speak to one another. Moses begged him, "Remember this is your special people. If you do not go with us, please don't make us leave this place where you are! Your presence is what makes us different from all other people on earth!" God answered, "I will go with you for your sake, Moses."

They built a special tent. In that tent, God met his people above a very special chest, called an ark, that God designed. God lived among his people as they traveled to the promised land. The people valued God's presence more than anything they owned.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The Sinai section of the story begins where Yahweh escorted his people to the foot of Mount Sinai and to the destiny of the nation of Israel. God had partially fulfilled the original covenant he made with Abraham centuries before. Here, Yahweh initiated and made a new covenant with the people of Israel.

As the Israelites left Egypt and walked toward Mount Sinai, leaving behind a pantheon of nearly 1,500 Egyptian gods, they had the opportunity to become reacquainted with Yahweh. He provided intimate object lessons to teach his people to rely on him alone by providing them fresh water, food, and victory over their enemies. This reliance on God prepared the Israelites for the conquest of their new home in the land of Canaan (Exod 15:22-27; 16:1-36; 17:1-16).

Despite being eyewitnesses to the miracles of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and their unanimous and verbal agreement to a sacred covenant, Israel reverted to the idol worship they observed in Egypt before Moses even came down the mountain. Israel appeared to embrace the deliverance and miracles of God but did not show singular devotion and allegiance to him. Reverting to pagan practices the Israelites witnessed in Egypt, they began to syncretize Yahweh and Egyptian idols. Under the pretense of worshiping God, the Israelites let their celebration devolve into a drunken sexual revelry (Exod 32:1-6).

Sadly, the age-old practice of syncretism continues to creep into Christian worship around the world. Prosperity gospel advocates around the world are reintroducing syncretic practices

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God Chose Abraham – Like Abraham, Moses was God’s chosen leader to serve his special people. God showed he is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

Moses Chose True Prosperity – The story of Moses and his close relationship with God continued.

The Warning of Solomon – God’s people enjoyed the benefits of God’s provision but quickly devolved to seeking after foreign gods.

Elijah and the False Prophets – Elijah, like Moses, was a frustrated leader at times and had to continually remind Israel of the covenant agreement they had made with God. The power display on a mountain top was reminiscent of the mountaintop experience Moses had at Sinai. Israel continued to sacrifice to idols rather than honor only God.

Capture of the Special Chest – The ark of the covenant is overtly connected to the story of Moses. The spiritual decline and the callous disregard for the covenant relationship with God was sadly demonstrated in both stories.

Birth of Jesus – There were many similarities between the life of Moses and Jesus, such as the infanticide following their births. We see in both a deliverer from sin and a mediator with God. Both gave up a life of royal status to intercede for God’s people. Moses offered to die for his people (Exod 32:32); Jesus actually did.

Cost of Following – There is no promise that life as an obedient follower will be a life of abundance or ease. Moses encountered challenges and disappointments. He embraced difficult circumstances in leadership as he walked with God. Moses chose to leave a life of luxury to be a servant leader. Moses chose to live in a tent in the desert with God near rather than in a palace without him.

Call to Suffer – Moses chose to suffer in a servant leader position rather than live a life of luxury in the palace. Moses had a life changing event at the burning bush that changed the trajectory of his life. Moses knew that walking with God was more precious than any amount of earthly wealth.

to a new generation. They draw large crowds of earnest seekers but do not share the real gospel. It is rather a motivational speaking event. This self-esteem gospel is not focused on God's holiness and man's redemption, but a self-centered message. Prosperity advocates reduce God's generosity in the forgiveness of sin to man-centered success. Worship in spirit and truth deteriorates to demanding that the Almighty provide a menu of one's desires: new cars, new homes, perfect health on earth, an attractive rich spouse. Attempting to manipulate God is a return to the wilderness and the golden calf. The polished prosperity gospel is the modern iteration of idolatry and the essence of animism.

Missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen defines animism as "the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power."¹

Some prosperity proponents will proof-text their sermons by introducing parts of the covenant. Deuteronomy 8:18 says, "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day" (ESV). They will falsely claim that this is a monetary guarantee for believers today.² Note that they ignore the following verse, 19: "And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish" (ESV). It seems that many seek after the god of money.

The story **Moses Intercedes for God's Presence** is essential to this set of stories that address the errors of the prosperity gospel. It reveals that many in this new nation of Israel gladly embraced the supernatural miracles of deliverance but not God, the Deliverer. Contentment in gratitude did not last long. They wanted his blessings, but they did not want him. God demands total allegiance. He expects his people to honor the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

This narrative requires the audience to reflect personally on the question, *Are we content with the presence of God in our journey of life or fixated on what we get from God?* Moses begs God on behalf of the people not to send them to the promised land if he would not accompany them. Yahweh's presence was worth more than the tangible blessings he gave. If our immaturity seeks gifts rather than the giver, it becomes dangerously close to idolatry. The false gospel of prosperity is manipulation ideology. This sub-theme of prosperity gospel/animism syncretism, rather than the genuine relationship, is interwoven throughout this series of stories.

¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 20.

² Robert Jackson, "Prosperity Theology and the Faith Movement," *Themelios*, October 1989, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/prosperity-theology-and-the-faith-movement/>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The story begins with an introductory paragraph that links the previous story to keep the audience up to date with the Moses narrative. Cohesive elements such as the deliverance from slavery in Egypt and mentioning Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered God previously, prepare the audience for the second part of the Moses narrative.

To emphasize the definition of covenant that may not be understood by the ultimate audience, we have rendered it “sacred agreement,” with “covenant” as a parenthetical element. This is intentional to reinforce the meaning of this critical biblical key term.

An important phrase, “My own special treasure,” is rendered in this story as “you will be my own people, more precious to me than all other people on earth.” We do this hoping not to cause the audience to think of treasure as somehow construed as monetary gain and promised riches.

We have taken the opportunity to detail that Moses received not only ten commandments but also the terms of the covenant as well as instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant (Exod 31:18; 32:15–16). The term *commandments* is rendered as “commands” to provide clarity for a non-churched audience.

The word we use in English and most other languages, *tabernacle*, is a transliteration of the Latin term *tabernaculum*, which means “a tent.” In the story set, it is rendered “special tent” in order not to import a foreign word. The Hebrew word מִשְׁכָּן *miškān* refers to a dwelling place, habitat, tent, or tabernacle. In this story it refers to the tent used as the central place of worship before the construction of the temple.³

Exodus 20–31 details the establishment of the covenant, the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle. A major twist to the story occurs when the people choose to break the newly established covenant. This twist is key to the narrative and the ongoing covenant conflict. Story crafters should employ culturally appropriate story twist posture and rhythm to emphasize this twist.

The former Hebrew slaves had gold because Yahweh had told them to request it from the Egyptians before they left, and Yahweh caused the Egyptians to grant whatever the Israelites had asked for. The Israelites walked away with the Egyptian wealth like spoils from a defeated enemy (Exod 12:35–36).

The remarkable discourse of God with Moses should be convicting to prosperity proponents. God tells Moses, “Leave me, so I can destroy them all and make you, Moses, a great nation!” Story crafters should be careful not to imply that Moses could prevent God from carrying out his desire. Rather, the phrase is inviting Moses into dialogue with God.

Moses has the opportunity to replace the covenant with Abraham. That would make him even more famous and powerful. Moses humbly reminds God of the oath he had made to Moses’s ancestors. Moses could have built a kingdom for himself. Later in Exod 32:32, Moses offers his soul for the sake of the Israelite people. We see Moses in these passages demonstrating true servant leadership rather than seeking self-promotion and prosperity.

Note the use of discourse or conversation in this section. This is intentional to demonstrate the relationship between God and Moses. Discourse is an oral feature in many African languages. Retaining discourse in the story will improve reproducibility and naturalness. Moses begins the process of completely desecrating the idol of the golden calf. While the details are interesting, for the sake of brevity and reproducibility, they are not included.

³ William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 701.

Moses again quotes God by using the messenger formula or a quote inside a quote. This is first seen in Exod 5:1 when Moses addresses Pharaoh. "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel" is rendered "Moses said, 'the God of Israel says.'" This is intentional to emphasize their intimate relationship. It clarifies that this judgment is from God, not Moses. Dialogue with these subtleties reinforces the scandalous nature of this betrayal of the covenant relationship with God and the inevitable pattern that plagues the history of the descendants of Abraham. We have chosen to make explicit that the judgment was not random but for those who chose to remain loyal to the idol rather than to God.⁴

For the sake of brevity and to enhance the drama of the death sentence, the story simply states: That day 3,000 men were killed.

As Moses seeks atonement, which is conveyed in the phrase "begging for forgiveness," God insists on accountability. God offers to send his angel ahead to guide Moses. This is not an ordinary angel, but rather an expression of a holy God who wishes to condescend to the human level via an angelic form.⁵

As Exodus 33 begins, there is a flashback within a flash-forward, regarding the mourning and removal of the ornaments the Israelites were wearing.⁶ This detail remains in the story to show that wealth, as displayed in jewelry and fine clothes, is nothing compared to the presence of Yahweh.

The figurative language in this idiomatic phrase, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses

face to face," would possibly be misinterpreted. We have chosen to express the meaning this way: "They spoke as friends would speak to one another."

As detailed above, the term "special tent" is a consistent key term used for "tabernacle." "Ark of the covenant" is rendered "special chest" for the sake of clarity for all audiences.

The story concludes with a summary statement, which is often used across Africa and around the world to reinforce the teaching of the story.

Background Information

Historical

The location of Mount Horeb/Sinai has long been debated. The name Mount Horeb was thought to be the Semitic term. Sinai refers to the same geographical area but is a different name from a different people group. Horeb is used frequently for Sinai in the book of Deuteronomy. The hypothesized locations in the southern Sinai Peninsula of Egypt are Jebel Musa, Ras es-Safsafah, and Jebel Serbal. "Early Christian tradition associated Mount Horeb/Sinai with Jebel Musa in the southern Sinai Peninsula."⁷ (The map suggests a possible route of the Exodus.)

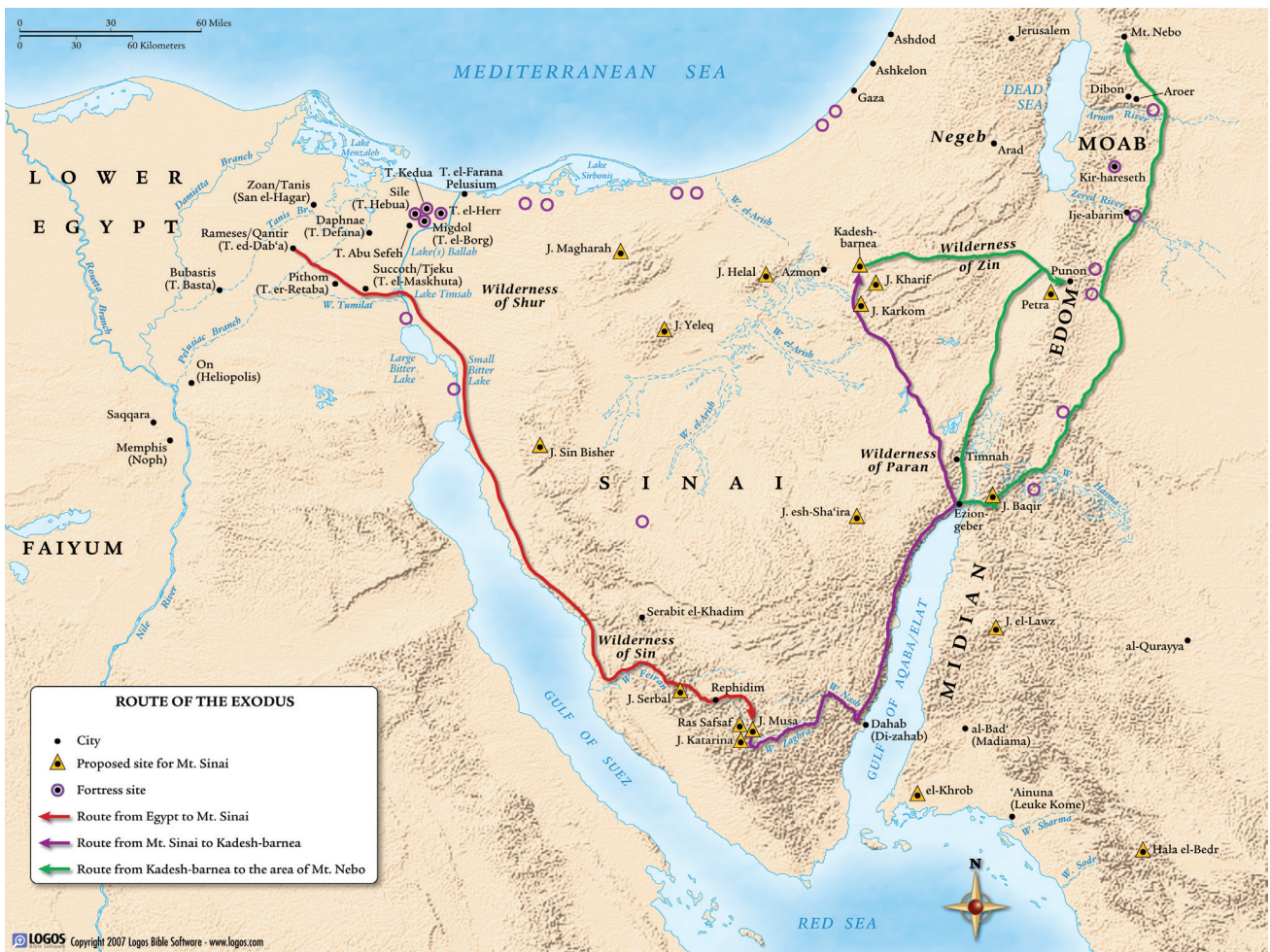
Within the pantheon of the gods in the idolatrous environment of ancient Egypt, the bull was a popular image. The high god, Amon-Re was commonly represented as a bull figure. Other gods as well were depicted with a bull. The bull is thought to represent in the Egyptian

⁴ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary v. 2 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 160.

⁵ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 47.

⁶ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 776.

⁷ John H. Walton, ed., *The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Old Testament v. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 228.



context virility, strength, and military prowess, which the adherents aspired to and wished to emulate. The people demanded Aaron to form an image of their god who brought them out of Egypt. In doing this they broke the first and second commandments they had just agreed to forty days earlier (Exod 20:2-6; Ps 106:19-21).

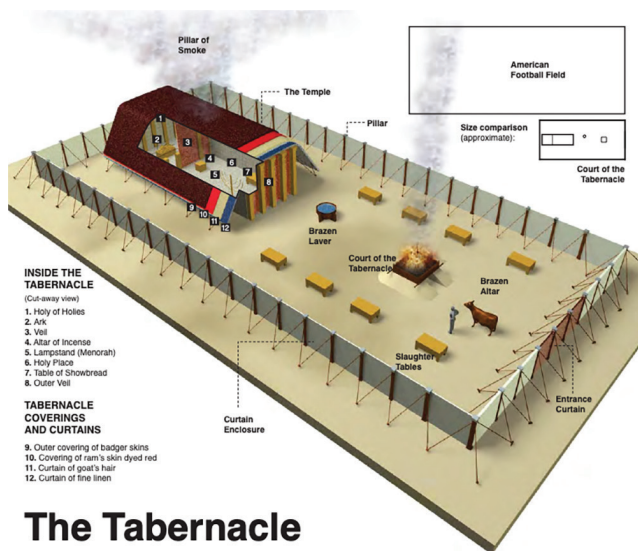
Biblical

The covenant relationship has been the pattern of God with his people, first with Noah then Abraham. Deuteronomy 29:13-14 shows the Sinai Covenant was an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant, both of which are called here “a sworn covenant.” The Sinai renewal merely stressed man’s responsibility where the Abrahamic Covenant emphasized God’s promise.⁸

Only voluntary donations of possessions or skilled labor were used in building the tabernacle (Exod 35). The phrasing in the Gospel of John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” refers to Jesus as the Son of God who “tabernacled” among God’s people. Many chapters of the Bible are dedicated to the design of the objects and the Tabernacle itself.

The two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments have been depicted in art and are an icon to the Moses narrative. Such depictions suggest an equal number of commandments written on each side. Rather, each tablet contained the full text. One copy was for one party of the covenant, the Israelites, and the other party, God. “This reflects the standard ancient

⁸ Elmer B. Smick, “282 בְּרִית” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, R. Laird Harris, et al., eds., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 128.



The Tabernacle

This portable temple was built in the wilderness by the Israelites circa 1450 BC after they were freed from Egyptian slavery. The tabernacle was the first temple dedicated to God and the first resting place of the ark of the covenant. It served as a place of worship and sacrifices during the Israelites' 40 years in the desert while conquering the land of Canaan.

GRAPHIC BY KARBEL MULTIMEDIA
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Near Eastern treaty covenant practice of providing a copy of the covenant both to the vassal and to the sovereign. The fact that the two tablets were eventually placed together in the ark (Deut 10:5; 1 Kgs 8:9; Heb 9:4) further symbolized the ark's role as a point of contact for God and his people. In the ark, his covenant relationship with them was symbolized by, among other things, the law, obedience to which linked Israel to Yahweh and Yahweh to Israel."⁹

One of the punishments that Moses meted out on the community of Israel in Exod 32:20 was to destroy the golden calf statue. He ground up the remaining ashes and gold and threw it into the water. Stuart suggests, "The statement that he "made the Israelites drink it" may not be the best translation of the Hebrew and at any rate probably does not mean he had them all line up and drink some as an organized group punishment. Rather it means that by putting the powder into their water supply, he saw to it that eventually the powder was drunk along with the water and thus went through the Israelites' bodies, came out as waste, corrupted and defiled, and therefore was ruined permanently as material fit for an idol."¹⁰

The Levites descended from Levi, Jacob and Leah's third son. Moses and Aaron were part of this tribe. The Levites volunteered for the difficult task and carried out the death sentence. They thus consecrated themselves as the priestly tribe of Israel. Exodus 32:29 tells us that the tribe of the Levites set themselves apart for the Lord's service.

The swords used in that period would have been shorter, closer to the size of a dagger rather than a long sword. Either side or both sides were sharpened. Soldiers carried this short sword in a sheath attached to a belt made of leather or other materials.

Characters

Yahweh/God

Moses

Aaron

Aaron, the son of Amram and Jochebed, descendant of the tribe of Levi, was most likely born in Egypt during the years of slavery. He was the brother of Moses and Miriam and a leader during the liberation of the Israelites. He later became the first high priest (Exod 29:9).

Israelites/Hebrews

God's chosen people were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. During Jacob's odyssey of redemption, he wrestled with God at Peniel and was given the name Israel, meaning one who struggles with God (Gen 32:28; 35:9-12).

Key Terms

Idol

A pagan object that represents a spirit or a god and is constructed by human hands for the purpose of worship, service, or great respect.

⁹ Stuart, *Exodus*, 656.

¹⁰ Stuart, *Exodus*, 678.

Sacred agreement

The conditional covenant between God and the Israelites established the new nation. It is an agreement between God and a person that has binding ramifications from one or both parties. Often one party had a higher status.

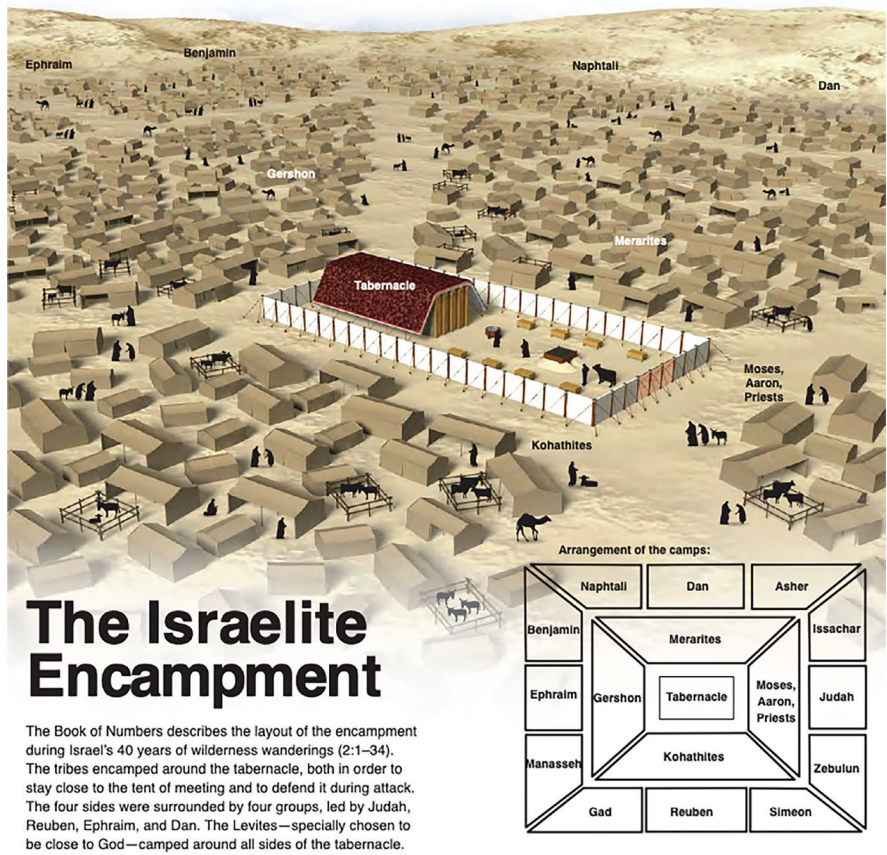
Special chest

The ark of the covenant is also called in Scripture the "ark of Yahweh," the "ark of God," or the "ark of the testimony" (see illustration on p. 107). It was a special chest or box built from acacia wood, overlaid with gold. The ark contained the Ten Commandments, a measure of manna, and the staff of Aaron that had budded. Scripture describes it as Yahweh's footstool or podium. It was a visible symbol of Yahweh's presence. Yahweh's throne is in the heavens (1 Chr 28:2).

Scripture describes it as Yahweh's footstool or podium. It was a visible symbol of Yahweh's presence. Yahweh's throne is in the heavens (1 Chr 28:2).

Not only was the ark a repository for the covenant, but it was also "Yahweh's footstool or podium" (1 Chr 28:2; Ps 99:5; 132:7; Lam 2:1), "above which was the divine throne itself, flanked in the manner characteristic of Canaanite royal thrones by a pair of winged sphinxes or cherubim." Thus, the ark was the visible sign of the holy presence of Yahweh whose real throne is on high above the heavens."¹¹

The lid of the ark is known as the mercy seat. "The Hebrew word is best rendered 'propitiatory.' The paraphrase 'mercy seat' by Tyndale was adopted from Luther. The mercy seat seems



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to be the nearest approximation of the presence of God among the Israelites. They were not permitted to make a material representation of God. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, which represented God's presence among them, hovered over the mercy seat where the high priest sprinkled the blood for the congregation of Israel on the Day of Atonement."¹² Yahweh issued mercy when the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the golden lid.

Special tent

The word we use in English and most other languages, *tabernacle*, is a transliteration of the Latin word *tabernaculum* meaning "a tent." *Tabernacle* is rendered "special tent" in order not to import a foreign word.

¹¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2007), 191.

¹² Merrill Chapin Tenney and Moisés Silva, eds., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 5: [Q-Z]* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 347.

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Story Guide 10

Capture of the Special Chest

Joshua 13:1; Judges 1:27-36; 2:1-4; 1 Samuel 4-7

As God had promised, he brought his people, the descendants of Abraham, into the land he had promised their ancestors. God divided the land among the tribes, but not all the tribes obeyed and took possession of the land. They even compromised with their enemies, intermarried, and *began to worship their gods to seek their blessing!*

During that time, the Israelites had tribal leaders called judges to rule over them. The Israelites did not always follow God or honor the sacred agreement. Even the sons of the chief priest, who were also priests, were wicked men. They did not respect their father or God. They often took for themselves large parts of the sacrifices that were offered to God.

The Israelites had a fierce enemy called the Philistines. One day this enemy attacked them and killed 4,000 of their soldiers. The elders of the Israelites asked, "Why did God allow this?" Instead of crying out and seeking God, they reacted like the idol worshipers around them. They said, "Maybe if we bring the special chest that represents God's presence to the battlefield, we will have victory!" When the special chest arrived at the Israelite military camp, the soldiers cheered thinking they would win because the chest was there. The Philistines heard their cheers and were very afraid! They said, "Their gods have come! They are very powerful! They are the gods that rescued the Israelites from Egypt and caused all the plagues there! We must fight hard!" The Philistines did fight hard. They killed 30,000 Israelites that day. The disrespectful young priests, sons of the chief priest, were killed in the battle. Their father sent out God's special chest without seeking God's permission. The Philistines captured the special chest! A messenger went back to town and told the chief priest about the slaughter, the deaths of his sons, and the capture of the special chest of God. When he heard this report, the old priest fell over and died.

The Philistines put the special chest in their own temple beside the idol of their god. The next morning, when they came into the

temple, they found their idol had fallen face down in front of the special chest. They placed their idol upright. The next morning, they found the idol had fallen face down again. This time the head and hands were broken off!

God then punished the Philistine people in the town where the special chest was kept. God struck them with terrible skin growths like tumors. When the people realized what was happening, they cried out, "We cannot keep the special chest of the God of Israel! He is against us! We will all be destroyed along with our god!" So, they sent the special chest to another Philistine town. The people there became sick with the same disease! Those people sent it to another town, and the people there refused to take it, but they became sick too!

Finally, the Philistine army put the special chest on a cart and sent the special chest back to Israel. The special chest stayed in a town in Israel for twenty years, and the Israelites mourned and cried—they felt like God had abandoned them. Their new judge, Samuel, said, "If you are serious about returning to God, get rid of your idols to other gods." The people did. They confessed their sins to God and asked his forgiveness. God did forgive them, and then he gave them victory over their enemy, the Philistines.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The narrative begins with a brief summary linking the previous stories of Israel's journey to the land God had promised their ancestors. As the Israelites settled into this new land, not all the tribes were obedient to take possession of their allotted areas. Their disobedience led to compromise that escalated to intermarriage, which God had forbidden. In these foreign marriages, the Israelites were exposed to the idolatry of the pagan wives. Even though the sacred agreement with God expressly forbid it, these marriages led to the adoption of the Canaanite gods. The Israelites sought the blessing of these false gods. And so began Israel's downward spiral during the time of the judges (Gen 15; Exod 12-40; Numbers 13-14; Joshua; Judg 2; 10; 1 Sam 8:7; Deut 7:3, 4).

A recurring pattern emerged. The Israelites would follow God exclusively and live in the covenant relationship he established. God would protect them from their enemies, and give them a time of peace. After a while, their total devotion to the covenant relationship would wane with intermarriage, material prosperity, and cultural compromises with the local inhabitants. This would lead to idol worship and oppression from their enemies. Even the spiritual leadership spiraled down dramatically by the time of the high priest Eli of Shiloh. Eli was losing both his physical and spiritual sight. His spiritual sight grew dim as fewer words of revelation were coming to him from God (Judg 11:26; 1 Sam 2:11-17, 22-36).

Eli failed to adequately discipline his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who themselves were priests. Eli received reports of their sexual misconduct. His sons showed contempt for the sacrifice with systematic pilfering of the choice meat. Eli's verbal reprimands had little impact. Emboldened by the lack of discipline, Eli's sons made a mockery of their office by abusing their privileges (1 Sam 3).

It was evident that after Israel's initial defeat, elders and leaders questioned why God had allowed it. Rather than seeking God and repenting, the elders sought to weaponize the ark of the covenant. The elders equated an object, the ark, with God. Their rationale was that if the ark moved, God must move and act on their behalf.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – We see the origin story of demons. Deuteronomy 32:16-17 and Lev 17:7 equate pagan idolatry to the worship of demons. God forbade his people to worship these demons and idols.

Moses Chose True Prosperity – The plagues of Egypt were judgments rendered against the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12). The Israelites were witnesses to these judgments and God's superior power.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – The Israelites broke the covenant with God through their worship of the golden calf idol. Allegiance to God alone was abandoned. The golden calf idol was in the form of a popular image of worship of other local gods. Israel had a pattern of seeking local gods rather than devotion to God alone.

Elijah and the False Prophets – Israel's King Ahab disobeyed the command of marrying a foreign wife. As warned, his heart and that of the nation of Israel followed and turned away from God. A confrontation between God's prophet Elijah and the prophets of the false gods ensued. God demonstrated his power as Israel watched on Mount Carmel.

The Warning from Solomon – Forbidden by God, King Solomon intermarried with foreign women who turned his heart away from God. He supported and participated in idolatry and the rejection of God's presence.

Temptation of Jesus – Jesus was tempted to take his kingdom immediately, to worship Satan, and to abandon his relationship with God.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned – Simon's scheme and the Israelites' desire to use God for their own ends were both rejected, and both resulted in severe consequences. These consequences included defeat from the hands of the enemy, a broken relationship with God, and the threat of damnation.

God was theirs to manipulate. The massacre they suffered proved that Yahweh cannot be controlled by man like a simple object. Israel abandoned the dynamic relationship with God and his presence among them (1 Sam 4:3-4).

The Israelite elders tried to manipulate God by bringing the ark to the battlefield. Prosperity and word of faith defenders exemplify the Israelite elders. They advocate that if you name and claim what you want from God with the right force of faith, he must do it. Kenneth Copeland, in his book *Laws of Prosperity*, said, "You can have what you say! In fact, what you are saying is exactly what you are getting now. If you are living in poverty and lack and want, change what you are saying. It will change what you have.... God will be obligated to meet your needs because of His Word."¹ Copeland has effectively mentored prosperity preachers around the world. These false teachers communicate that Yahweh, the covenant keeper, submits to this man-centered gospel.

This story from the biblical account is a cautionary reminder to all who claim to be followers of God. Worship and a relationship with God can become ritualistic and empty. Furthermore, this story serves as a warning to modern-day prosperity proponents. Many resemble Hophni and Phinehas, who overstepped their roles and took the choice parts of the offerings given to God. Are prosperity advocates daring this same infringement?

It has become routine for the famed prosperity advocates to appeal to their base to support their exorbitant lifestyle. In 2015, Kenneth Copeland and Jesse Duplantis unashamedly appealed for *additional* jets for their airline fleets, claiming ministry needs. Prosperity preachers are known for asking for "seed" money. A financial donation to their ministry is said to be "planted" so that it will yield a much more profitable financial blessing to the giver. The lavish lifestyles of these prosperity proponents are supported by the seed money sent in by donors.

Gloria Copeland, wife of Kenneth Copeland, explained a transactional promise to donors from Mark 10:30 regarding seed money: "You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars."² Preachers around the world proclaim the concept of seed money boldly.

Capture of the Special Chest shows how the caretakers of the ark of the covenant routinely abused their office much like today's prosperity teachers. Hophni and Phinehas expected the congregants to provide far beyond what was appropriate. Much like their infamous role models, today's prosperity teachers are leading congregants to finance their luxury lifestyles and their abuse of privileges.

The story **Capture of the Special Chest** also reveals how the relationship with God was no longer a priority for the people. During the period of the judges, Israel rejected the covenant relationship with Yahweh for gods whom they sought to manipulate for their own gain. This fractured relationship led to the consequences of defeat at the hands of their enemies. A syncretic representation of God is no substitute for covenant relationship (1 Sam 4). Just as the curse from the unnamed prophet fell on Eli and his uncontrollable sons, those who seek to profit at the flock's expense and God's reputation are warned (1 Sam 2:27-36).

¹ Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Ft. Worth: Kenneth Copeland Pub., 1974), 98, 101.

² Gloria Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1978), 54.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

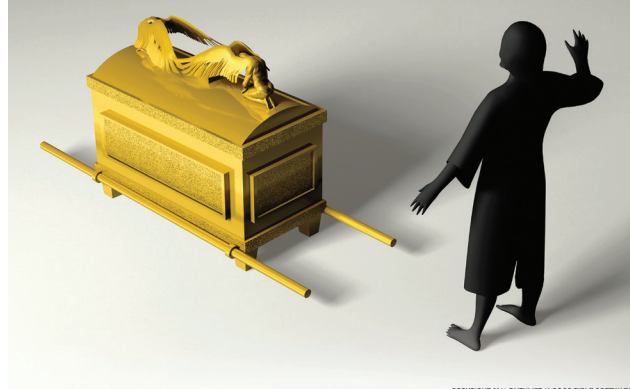
The story picks up again generations after Moses led the Israelites through an eventful forty years in the wilderness. Because God's people disobeyed and refused to enter and take possession of the land, he extended their journey. Moses, Aaron, and their generation died before entering into the promised land. The Israelites failed to drive the Canaanites from the land. Their intermarriage with local pagan groups began to divide the hearts of the Israelites. Ultimately, this failure led many Israelites to adopt the pagan gods as they sought the blessing of the foreign gods over Yahweh. Even though God raised up localized tribal leadership as a series of "judges," the Israelites did not honor the covenant they had made with God. The introduction of the story quickly summarizes this series of events that occur over a period of centuries.

In this story, we do not go into the details of the names of the high priest Eli of Shiloh, nor his sons Hophni and Phinehas. The names are not mentioned again in the story set. The literal translation, sons of Belial, meant the epitome or personification of wickedness and was an insult both to their father Eli and the sons. Their flagrant disregard for the holiness of God and his presence led to not only their own demise, but also the capture of the sacred ark, and the spiritual abuse of the Israelite people.

We did choose to use the name of the Philistines as they are a prominent enemy of the Israelites. We did not use the name of the gods of the Philistines. The orality principle is to limit the number of foreign names, especially those not repeated in the story set.

Throughout the story set, one should note the use of dialogue. Dialogue provides dimension to the characters and generates interest in the audience. The characters come alive as the discussion takes place. It also helps the audience remember the details of the story. Dialogue

The Ark of the Covenant



puts the audience in the middle of the story rather than allowing them to remain an outside observer.

Note the consistent use of key terms such as "the sacred agreement" for "the covenant." The orality principle of using a broader term rather than a more specific term guards the accuracy while making the story more accessible to a larger audience. Perhaps Christian believers are familiar with these specific terms in the stories. The ultimate audience, however, may not know the correct definition of the traditional terms.

The details of pilfering the sacrifice found in 1 Sam 2 show that the priests were breaking the Levitical law set forth in the Torah (Lev 7:22-26). For the sake of brevity, our story's description of this abuse of office is generalized and remains faithful to the meaning. The priests were taking a greater portion of the sacrifice belonging to God.

The number of dead from the battle for Israel is an intentionally salient detail that contrasts with the previous 4,000 dead mentioned earlier. Note the intentionally repeated concepts such as disrespectful priests and use of the ark without consulting Yahweh. Repetition reminds the audience that the act was inappropriate. The Israelites had reduced his holy presence in their midst to an object rather than a covenant bond relationship. Once the ark was captured,

the Lord demonstrated through the ark that he was not to be played around with. God proved that he had the power to defeat the Philistines decisively, but he absolutely would not allow his people to think that they could control him or manipulate him. God demonstrated his power in a manner that spoke to the pagans.

First Samuel 5:6 states “The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod” (ESV). “The Hebrew word for ‘hand’ is frequently used metaphorically in 1 and 2 Samuel and throughout the Old Testament to mean ‘power’ or ‘control.’ ... God’s ‘hand’ may be related to punishment or deliverance.”³ Rather than using the metaphorical wording, we use the concrete wording of “punished” for the sake of clarity. For reproducibility reasons, the route of the ark in Philistia is not in the details of this story. The details of the god Dagon and his temple are not included in the story for similar reasons. The story concludes with summary statements of repentance. The Israelites abandoned their idols. They confessed their sin. They asked for forgiveness. God forgave them and protected the Israelites from the Philistines.

Background Information

Historical

The Philistines were a people group thought to have immigrated from the island of Crete off the coast of Greece. These warring people first settled along the coast near modern-day Gaza in Israel. They lived in five cities: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron known collectively as Philistia (Josh 13:3). Each city had an independent ruler, but the city leaders worked cooperatively. Their peak of influence was from 1200–1000 BC. The Philistines worshiped primarily three gods: Ashtoreth, Dagon, and Baal-Zebub.

- Ashtoreth was a mother goddess figure sought after for her influence in love, fertility and war. She is often depicted with two horns on her head.
- Dagon was a god of vegetation and fertility.
- Baal-Zebub was the primary god of Ekron. He was known as the lord of flies, because he could allegedly repel the plague of flies. This was a much-dreaded plague.

These gods were prominent in the Middle East, where an arid landscape requires rainfall to sustain life. Rainfall and fertility were closely associated with the land of Canaan in the pantheon of gods. The text says the Philistine soldiers abandoned their idols on the battlefield (2 Sam 5:21). Modern-day excavations continue to yield artifacts from this time period.

In the ancient Near East, to demonstrate that an enemy was completely conquered, the victor confiscated the enemy’s gods. Manuscripts documenting this practice were found dating back to King Nebuchadnezzar and the Assyrian and Hittite dynasties. It was also common practice to decapitate and cut off the hands of the enemy. There is another explicit detail from the text that suggests this battle is between Yahweh and the gods of the Philistines. It was taboo to cross the threshold of a superior god. The threshold separated the sacred area from a common area.⁴ The disease that swept through Philistia was reminiscent of the plagues on the Egyptians. This struck terror into the worldview and hearts of the Philistines. Commentators speculate that the disease Yahweh inflicted upon the Philistines was the bubonic plague.

³ Roger L. Omanson and John Ellington, *A Handbook on the First Book of Samuel*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2001), 110, 125–126.

⁴ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 206.



Biblical

The map shows the land designation of each tribe of Israel as decided by casting lots.

Twelve judges are listed in the Book of Judges who lead up to our story. God chose these judges to rule the people: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson. In 1 Samuel, Eli and later Samuel are also judges.

Eli, a descendant of Aaron's youngest son, was the high priest and judge of Shiloh, the location of the tabernacle. He served forty years. Eli was the priest who accused his earnest parishioner Hannah of being drunk when she was praying so diligently for a son. Later, that son, Samuel, was born and entered the service of the prophets as a child. He was mentored by Eli. Eli's legacy, however, allowed his sons Hophni and Phinehas to degrade the priesthood. As both a

judge and a high priest, Eli was duty-bound to correct his sons for their flagrant disrespect for the sacrifices offered to Yahweh and for sexual impropriety. This ineffectual leadership made Eli culpable.

Hophni and Phinehas were involved sexually with the young women serving at the tabernacle. These women were not prostitutes as was common among the Canaanite religious practices of the day.

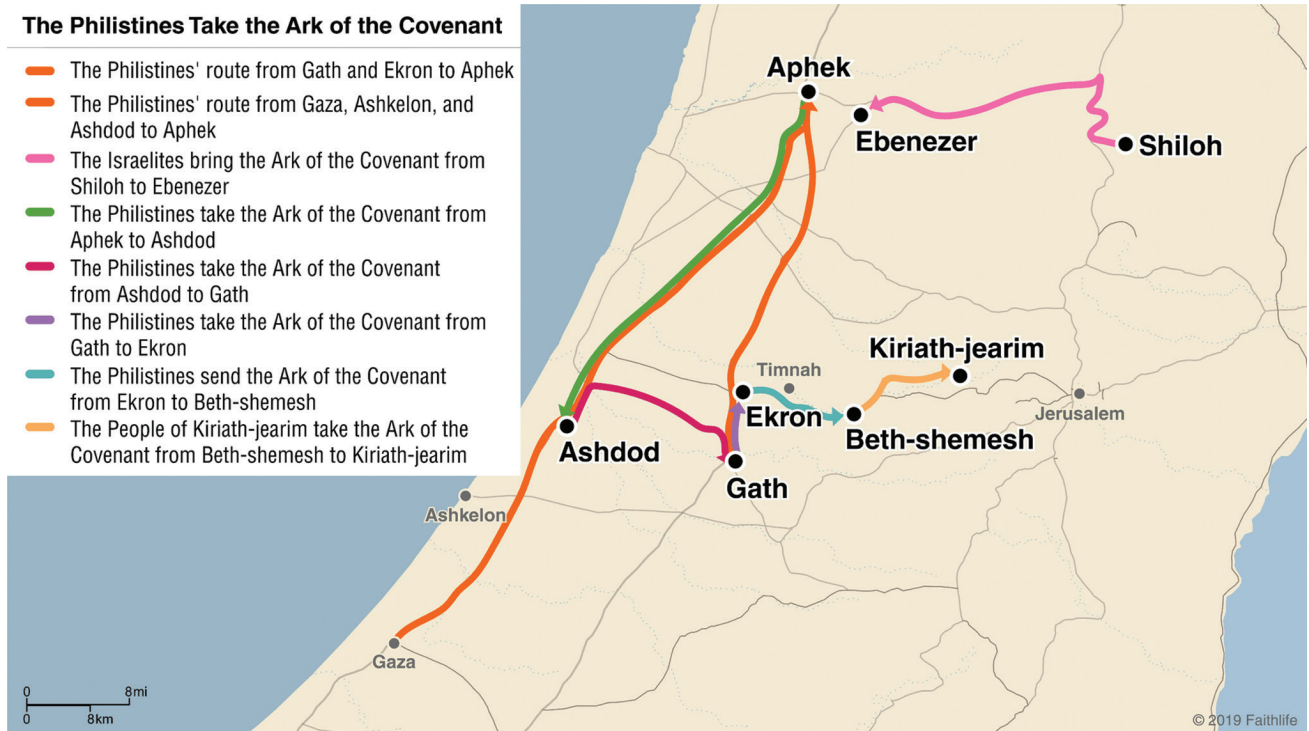
The sons were breaking the Levitical law by taking part in the meat sacrifice that was to go to God (Lev 3:3-5).

Old Testament scholar, Gordon J. Wenham, describes the sacrificial animal rite in Lev 3.

The worshiper brought his animal to the entrance of the tent of meeting, vv. 1-2, 7-8, 12-13.... Then he had to lay his hand on the head of the animal (vv. 2, 8, 13), thereby identifying himself with the animal or transferring his guilt to it. At this point in the ceremony he probably explained why he was offering the sacrifice, e.g., that he had come to thank God for his prayer being answered, or his vow being fulfilled. Then he had to kill (shāḥaṭ, cf. 1:5) the animal, and the priest would splash its blood over the altar. The animal was now skinned and cut up. This is not stated in ch. 3 but must be assumed on the analogy of the burnt offering.⁵

The fat that surrounded the internal organs, kidneys, and a large section of the liver was to be roasted as a soothing odor for God during the burnt sacrifice process. The servant, on behalf of Hophni and Phinehas, insisted on taking their portion first, before the roasting process. The servant threatened the worshiper with physical force if he met with resistance.

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1979), 79.



The warranted offenses received appropriate punishment. An unnamed prophet delivered Yahweh's judgment to Eli for his contempt and for ignoring the commands of God. God did not punish Eli for the sins of his sons, but for honoring them above God. The punishment was the premature death of Eli's entire family. Those distant relatives who did survive would have to beg for food.

The phrase in 1 Sam 4:10b, that the surviving Israelites fled to their tents or homes, means they actually left their military duty and returned to their individual homes upon this discouraging defeat. There is also textual evidence that the sanctuary in Shiloh was destroyed. Scholars point out that it is not referenced again in 1 or 2 Samuel as a worship center. The ark was returned to a different location, and other Old Testament writers reference this punishment and the departure of God (Ps 78:60; Jer 7:12-14; 26:6, 9).

The Philistines sent gifts of gold forged in the shapes of tumors and mice along with the ark back to the Israelites. Mice were the probable carriers of the plague sent by God. The tumors

were painful skin growths or sores. Five sets representing the five towns of Philistia were sent as a guilt offering. Not only a confession of guilt, it was also financial reparation.

The town in Israel accepted the ark and the gifts and quickly used the wood from the cart to make a sacrifice to Yahweh. Even on this happy occasion, the Israelites failed to follow protocol. They sacrificed heifers instead of bulls as required by the law. The ark was not revered but was put on display as a common object and opened. This brought harsh judgment on the land.

Characters

Philistines

A warring immigrant tribe that occupied five cities in the area southwest of Israel, close to the coast near modern-day Gaza, Israel.

Eli of Shiloh

He was the high priest and judge for Israel who served for forty years. His sons were priests, but he failed to discipline or hold them accountable

for their abuse in their position. Yahweh punished Eli for honoring his sons over Yahweh.

Hophni and Phinehas

Sons of the high priest and priests themselves who abused their position. They were responsible for losing the ark of the covenant into the hands of the Philistines and the loss of 30,000 Israelite soldiers.

Samuel

Judge, priest, prophet, and successor to Eli. Samuel grew up under and was an apprentice of Eli at Shiloh. He founded the first “school of prophets” in the Old Testament. He was a godly man who followed God’s commands throughout his life.

Key Terms

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the religious act of making a gift to God or to some other powerful spiritual being to establish, maintain, or restore a proper relationship between the person making the sacrifice and the deity. The motives may be (1) to honor God and thank him for blessings received, or (2) more often, to obtain forgiveness for sins committed, or to get purification from uncleanness, or (3) to buy back a life that would otherwise have been forfeited, by substituting the life of an animal for the life of the person redeemed. More than one of these purposes may apply at the same time.⁶

Temple

A building used for religious worship and usually regarded as the residence of a deity.

Idol

A pagan object that represents a spirit or a god and is constructed by human hands for the purpose of worship, service, or great respect.

High Priest

The term “Chief Priest” is used in the story set. He is the designated leader priest in Israelite worship. His garments represented this office, which dates back to Aaron, the first high priest, brother of Moses.

⁶ Katharine Barnwell, Paul Dancy, and Anthony Pope. *Key Biblical Terms, An Aid for Bible Translators* (Dallas, Texas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995).

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Story Guide 11

God's Chosen King

1 Samuel 13, 16, 18, 23, 24; 31:4; 2 Samuel 2

Years passed after Samuel called the Israelites to turn away from the idols they worshiped. The Israelites begged for a king, and Saul was chosen. But after a while, King Saul did not obey God completely—and God was not happy with King Saul. God chose a new king for his people. God sent Samuel to a certain family in Bethlehem to perform the selection ceremony and anoint the next king. God said, “I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” When Samuel saw the oldest son, who was tall and handsome, he thought, “This must be the one God wants as king!” But God told Samuel, “I do not make decisions the way you do! People judge by outward appearance, but I look at the heart. I do not choose him.” Son after son was presented to Samuel, but God rejected each one. Finally, the youngest son, David, came. He had been in the field tending the sheep. God told Samuel, “This is the one I choose.” From that day on, God’s Spirit was with David.

David waited patiently to become king. He respected and served Saul. David became a mighty warrior and a musician. He became so popular with the people of Israel that Saul became very jealous and tried to kill David! But David escaped into the bush.

While David was in the bush, hundreds of loyal followers and soldiers came to support him. Saul and his elite troops hunted David and his men. One day when Saul was hunting David, Saul went into a cave to go to the bathroom. David and his men were hiding in the back of that same cave! David’s men whispered to him, “Now is your opportunity!”

Then David crept up to Saul and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. Later David felt guilty because he had cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. He said to his men, “I will not harm the king that God has anointed, his chosen king.” David did not allow his men to kill Saul.

After Saul had left the cave and gone on his way, David came out of the cave. From a high place, he called out to Saul and bowed low in respect, “My father, oh king, see I am not trying to kill you.

You were just in the cave. My men told me to kill you, but I spared you. I will not harm the king that God has anointed, his chosen king. Look at what I have in my hand. It is a piece of your robe! I cut it off, but I didn't kill you."

Saul said, "Oh my son David, you are a better man than I am. You have been good to me, but I have done wrong to you. May God bless your kindness to me." Saul went back to the palace, but David stayed in the bush.

Sometime later, Saul died in a battle with the enemies of God's people, the Philistines. David eventually became king, just as God said.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

David's story began years after Samuel led the Israelites to turn back to God. Israel had once again gone against the counsel of the Lord, this time asking for a king like the other nations. The new king, Saul, proved quickly that he was not completely devoted to God. God then chose a man who would serve him wholeheartedly (Acts 16:22). This story has been called the most significant turning point in Israel's monarchical history.

God instructed the prophet Samuel to anoint David, a young shepherd boy, and set him apart to succeed Saul. David grew and demonstrated respect for King Saul, whom the Lord had anointed and chosen. But Saul attempted to kill David in the palace as well as during the infamous manhunt.

Scripture then recounts two episodes where David had the opportunity to kill Saul and take the kingdom by force. Both times, David responded to the prodding of well-intentioned fellow soldiers that no one should harm God's chosen anointed man (1 Sam 24-28). "He said to his men, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord's anointed'" (1 Sam 24:6 ESV).

Prosperity and word of faith proponents interpret this verse differently, ignoring the context. They use older versions that do not use modern language in an attempt to disguise the context of the Scripture.

Costi Hinn, the nephew and heir apparent to the prosperity and word of faith evangelist Benny Hinn, wrote a book from an insider's perspective on the ministry and lifestyle of the movement. In *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel*, Costi Hinn shared how 1 Sam 24:6 is used in word of faith circles beyond the context of 1 Samuel. He explains that it is one of four reasons given why God did not heal a person. "Touching the Lord's anointed: speaking against or opposing a man of God who is anointed."¹

Costi Hinn also points out, 1 Sam 24:6 is used to avoid accountability by the word of faith move-

ment. "One sermon I heard went something like this: 'When a man is anointed by God, don't touch him! Even if that man is a devil, the office he functions within is anointed. Don't speak against him or you'll be cursed!' I was caught between wondering whether this was the ultimate gag order or the divine decree of God. Was it possible that the family I loved was abusing people with their power and influence?"²

In 1 Sam 24: 6, David referred to King Saul specifically. Later, the Chronicler credited David with this song that says, "Do not touch my chosen people, and do not hurt my prophets" (1 Chr 16:22 NLT). This was in a song of thanksgiving when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem. The context of this verse referred to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Neither verse refers to the modern-day, self-titled prophets nor anyone who attempts to hide behind these verses taken out of context. Social media headlines and internet news articles from across Africa suggest similar abuse with this proof-texting from 1 Sam 24:6 and 1 Chr 16:22.

David had the opportunity to kill King Saul and seize the power of his rightful position. He waited on the Lord's timing and sovereignty. Power and riches were not David's priority.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Capture of the Sacred Chest – King David reunited the tribes of Israel. He brought the sacred chest back to Jerusalem. David modeled worship and devotion to God alone.

The Warning from Solomon – Solomon became king after his father King David. Solomon built the special house of worship that David wanted to build.

Birth of Jesus – Jesus, a descendant of King David, was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus now sits on the eternal throne that God promised David's descendants.

¹ Costi W. Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 49-50.

² Hinn, *God, Greed, Prosperity*, 78.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

God's Chosen King is an origin story of the patriarch King David. David's role of uniting the tribes of Israel, preparing materials for the temple construction, and being an ancestor to Jesus Christ is fundamental to the metanarrative of Scripture. The introduction draws upon **The Capture of the Sacred Chest**. Cohesive characters like Samuel give the audience points of reference to understand the timeline.

We chose to use King Saul's name in the example story. If your audience has difficulty remembering his name, then he can be referred to simply as the king. We did not use Jesse's name as he will not be mentioned in future stories of this set. Introducing multiple proper nouns can limit comprehension and reproducibility. We did introduce the town of Bethlehem that will be mentioned in the Birth of Jesus story.

In the example story, we have changed references of LORD to "God."

For the scope of this story set, *The Pearl of Great Worth*, we did not go into the backstory of Samuel's conversation with God about the potential threat from Saul. One can tell David's anointing story as a separate story and include many of those details.

In 1 Sam 16:1 God says, "I have chosen someone to be my new king." This is significant in that God made the choice. The people did not choose their king. Samuel says in 1 Sam 16:6, "Surely this is the LORD's anointed" (NLT). Throughout the Old Testament, "the Lord's anointed" is closely linked with kings. Anointing symbolizes that God's Spirit has come on someone and that God has chosen that person. We have made this meaning explicit by saying, surely this is the "one God wants as king!"

The dialogue in the example narrative between God and Samuel is intentional. Dialogue in

narrative is a common language feature in sub-Saharan Africa. It gives the story a mnemonic device to aid in retelling the story. The dialogue does not suggest that others in attendance such as Jesse heard this dialogue.

The drama of the selection of the son to be king, his description—the firstborn, tall, and handsome, but then the unlikely choice of the youngest son as king—has made for lively discussion among testing groups in West Africa. The fact that David was a young shepherd is a cultural detail that is appreciated in testing groups.

First Samuel 16:13 states that God's Spirit filled David from that day on, suggesting that the Spirit never left him. God's Spirit no doubt influenced David's choices later in the narrative.

The story continues summarizing that David grew into a young man truly walking with and trusting in the Lord. David served in a position of trust as Saul's armor-bearer for a time. David became an accomplished musician. He played instruments for the king and is credited for writing many of the Psalms.

Saul attempted to kill David in the palace more than once as his jealousy and instability grew. When those attempts failed, Saul sent David to the battlefield to have him killed while fighting the Philistines (1 Sam 18).

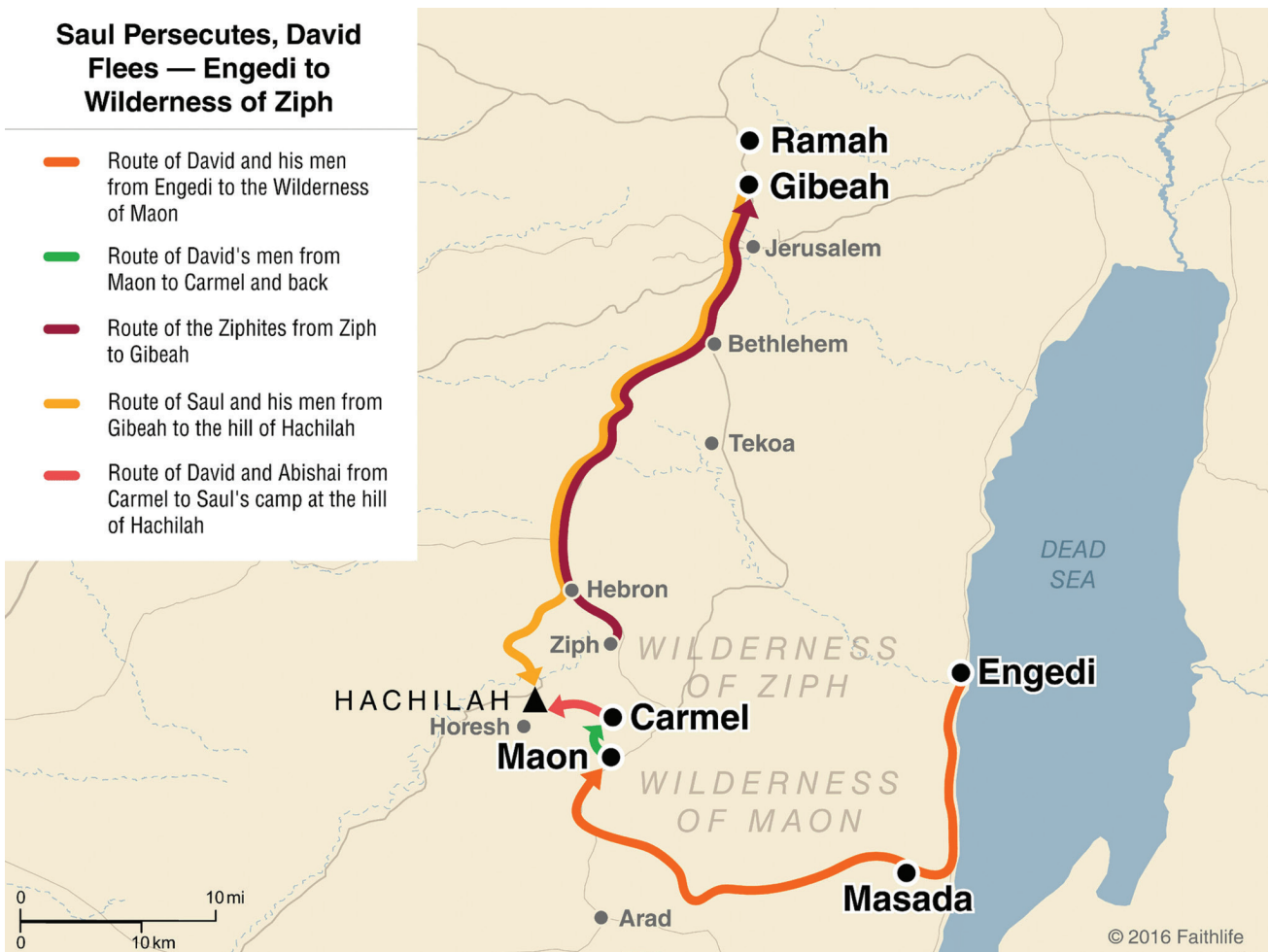
The story quickly moves to David's departure to hide in the wilderness in 1 Sam 21-29. "Bush" is a familiar term for wilderness across Africa.

We have chosen to highlight the episode where King Saul stepped into a cave to go to the bathroom. This is the same cave where David and his men were hiding. This is a salient detail for the audience. The phrase in Hebrew, for relieving himself, is "to cover his feet."

For the sake of brevity, we did not include the false prophecy the men spoke to David.

Saul Persecutes, David Flees — Engedi to Wilderness of Ziph

- Route of David and his men from Engedi to the Wilderness of Maon
- Route of David's men from Maon to Carmel and back
- Route of the Ziphites from Ziph to Gibeah
- Route of Saul and his men from Gibeah to the hill of Hachilah
- Route of David and Abishai from Carmel to Saul's camp at the hill of Hachilah



David felt guilt for cutting off part of Saul's robe in the cave. The cutting of the king's robe has much greater significance culturally. Bergen writes, "It signified the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David. Furthermore, by removing the corner of the robe, David made Saul's robe to be in a state of non-compliance with Torah requirements (see Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12). Thus, Saul's most obvious symbol of kingship was made unwearable. In essence, David had symbolically invalidated Saul's claim to kingship."³

David had a strong reaction to his men who suggested he kill Saul. David responded with a strong Hebrew idiom, "the LORD forbid," or "never!" We have used both "anointed" and "chosen one" in the narrative to reinforce au-

dience understanding. David's men were also being hunted. The text suggests disagreement that required restraint (NLT) or persuasion (ESV) from David their leader.

We use a transitional phrase to change the scenes of the narrative. Saul left the cave and had gone on his way. The En Gedi wilderness is rough, rocky, and mountainous. The original audience of 1 Samuel were familiar with the reputation of this area. We have made explicit that David went to a high place, a safe place, a distance to call down to King Saul.

David addressed Saul respectfully with a low, deep bow. The phrase in Hebrew can be interpreted as a bow or to lay prostrate. The storyteller may choose either definition depending

³ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary v. 7 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 182.



Today in Israel, the En Gedi Nature Reserve is the traditional site of where David hid from Saul. Photo taken by Grauesel, available at commons.wikimedia.org.

on which displays respect in the local culture. David addressed Saul as Father. He was not David's biological father. It is another form of respect to the Lord's chosen king. David testified not only to Saul but to all the troops present that he spared the king's life.

Dialogue helps keep the story moving and interesting for the audience. Saul responded to David in front of the witnesses. He addressed David as son. David was Saul's son-in-law (1 Samuel 18). Earlier in 1 Samuel, Saul had stopped calling David by name. He called him son of Jesse (1 Sam 20:27-31; 22:7-13).

We conclude their dialogue with Saul's blessing. The rich narrative of David reminds us that riches and power are nothing compared to a right relationship with God.

Background Information

Historical

Bethlehem is 8 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem.

The story does not reference David being an armor bearer for Saul. That is for the sake of brevity. This detail may be added if deemed important for the local audience. Armor bearers had reputations of bravery. They stood by their masters when the battle intensified. If masters were mortally wounded, armor bearers were often asked to kill their masters before the enemy could capture them. Chariots replaced the role of armor bearers. The Israelite army began using chariots after the reign of King David.

David and his men hid from King Saul at one point in the wilderness of En Gedi. This terrain is rocky and mountainous. This waterfall covers a cave that tradition holds is where David and his men hid.

People judge by outward appearance, but God looks at a person's thoughts and intentions.

This is a way of expressing the idiomatic saying that God looks at "a person's heart." "Outward appearance" refers to the things that people can see. Use an appropriate expression that conveys that God sees a person's internal condition—beyond what is visible.

"To relieve oneself" translates the Hebrew phrase to "cover one's feet," though scholars do not know the exact meaning of this phrase. It is also used in relationship to Ehud's assassination of Eglon, the king of Moab (Judg 3).

Biblical

The olive oil in Samuel's horn was most likely a specially prepared holy anointing oil similar to the recipe in Exod 30:23-25. It may have symbolized God's presence entering into the anointed person and power in general. The horn was an animal's horn used for holding liquids

The use of shepherding imagery is common in the Old Testament to refer to people who rule over others.

Characters

King Saul

King Saul was the first king of Israel from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul never consistently sought God’s guidance in ruling or in defending Israel from enemies. Saul did not respect the proper ceremony of sacrifice or follow God’s command to annihilate the Amalekites and their property. He did not execute their king or his choice animals. Because of his consistent disobedience, the Lord rejected Saul as king.

David

Most scholars believe David was fifteen years old when Samuel anointed him as the next king. David grew up shepherding his father’s flock. He was thirty years old when he became king of Israel. God told him that he would shepherd God’s people—the nation of Israel (2 Sam 5:2). Many ancient Near Eastern cultures used the shepherd as a symbol of a king’s care for his people.

Samuel

Samuel was a judge, priest, prophet, and successor to Eli. He grew up under and was an apprentice of Eli at Shiloh. He founded the first “school of prophets” in the Old Testament. He was a godly man who followed God’s commands throughout his life.

Key Terms

Prophet/spokesman

Choose a term for “prophet” that adequately describes the prophet’s function. A prophet

1. receives a call from God,
2. takes God’s message to men as directed by God himself, and



3. has only one priority: bringing the Word of God to men.

We chose “spokesman” because, in English, it can convey these three meanings but does not carry the unwanted connotation of a fortune-teller. If you use a religious term, be sure that it has a meaning that the average hearer will understand.⁴

The Temple

The temple was the unique Jewish place of worship and was constructed in Jerusalem by King Solomon. Even the word temple in English has such religious connotations that few people truly understand what it means.

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

⁴ Stephen Stringer, *Storying Training 4 Trainers* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 70.

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Story Guide 12

The Warning from Solomon

1 Kings 3-11; Deuteronomy 7:3-4

King David's son Solomon became the king of unified Israel after David died. Solomon loved God like his father David. One evening God said to Solomon, "Ask for anything, and I will give it to you!" Solomon said, "Oh God, I am your servant. Please give me an understanding heart, the wisdom I need to rule your people well, and the ability to know the difference between good and evil."

The Lord was pleased and said, "Because you have asked for the wisdom to rule my people justly instead of for long life, wealth, or your enemies to be killed, I will give you what you have asked. I will give you wisdom. I will also give you what you have not asked for, wealth and fame, more than any other king ever. If you follow my laws from the sacred agreement, I will give you a long life as well."

Sometime later, two prostitutes came to King Solomon to settle their dispute. One said, "This woman and I live in the same house. We both gave birth to a child three days apart. During the night, her baby died. When she found her baby was dead, she switched our babies! When I woke up in the morning, I tried to nurse my child, but he would not. He was dead! As I began to look at him in the morning light, I saw that he was not my child at all." The other lady interrupted, saying, "No, my child is the living child, not yours!" The women began arguing in front of the King.

King Solomon made his ruling and said, "Bring me a sword. Cut the living baby in half, giving each woman half of the child!" Immediately, one of the women begged, "Oh NO, my Lord, give her the child." The other woman said, "All right, just divide him between us." The king ordered, "Do not kill the child. Give him to the woman who wants him to live. She is his mother!" When all of Israel heard the king's decision, the people were in awe of the king. They saw the wisdom God had given him for rendering justice.

King Solomon continued to rule. He built the House of Worship to God in Jerusalem. Years passed, and he became very rich. **But King Solomon did not handle his success well.** He began to

ignore the sacred agreement between God and his people. Even though the king had wealth, success, and blessings, he turned away from God. He married foreign wives and began to worship and make sacrifices to their false gods. His people, the Israelites, followed his example and worshiped the false gods to seek their blessing. He even built places of worship for these gods near the chosen city of Jerusalem!

God appeared to King Solomon one last time. He said to Solomon, "Since you have not kept the sacred agreement and have disobeyed my commands, your kingdom will be torn apart." Despite wisdom, fame, and riches, Solomon's **legacy is the broken sacred agreement, and a nation torn apart.**

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

King David declared that his son Solomon would be his heir to the throne. Although this did not go unchallenged, Solomon successfully ascended to the throne. **The Warning from Solomon** begins after his reign began. The new king frequently traveled to a holy place and made sacrifices to God. Solomon made these large and frequent sacrifices out of his devotion to God. He did not have an ulterior motive such as seeking blessing or compensation. This attitude pleased God.

Riches, prosperity, and success soon followed the king but proved to be too much for Solomon. An appetite for more led to hundreds of foreign wives and concubines. God had explicitly warned his chosen people of this very thing (Deut 7:3-4). The covenant relationship with God was broken. The consequences of Solomon's sin meant that his heir would reign over only one of the twelve tribes of the formerly united Israel. Solomon's legacy is a broken relationship with God and the disbanded kingdom of Israel.

A prosperity worldview would have us believe that riches and power will solve all our problems. Prosperity advocates attempt to sell a cheap gospel that says God's purpose is to make you rich and healthy. **The Warning from Solomon** is a powerful admonition that wealth and success as the ultimate ambition is never satisfying. Solomon's life is an important lesson. Insatiable appetites lead to ruin. Only a right relationship with God truly satisfies.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God's Chosen King – King David was Solomon's father and became heir to the throne. Solomon built the temple that David wanted to build. David unified the tribes of Israel. But Solomon's legacy is a nation torn apart.

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal – King Ahab followed the example of Solomon. He married a foreign wife, sought the blessing of the foreign gods, and led the people of God down this path of idol worship.

Temptation of Jesus – Solomon caved to external lusts and pressures and ultimately worshiped false gods. Jesus, also a descendant of David, was similarly tempted to worship the false god, Satan, to satisfy his physical hunger, to demonstrate and abuse his power, and to take his kingdom immediately rather than through God's plan of ultimate sacrifice.

Parable of the Rich Fool – Jesus warned in this parable not to store up earthly abundance that leads to neglect of one's relationship with God. Solomon neglected his relationship with God for earthly pleasure.

Lazarus and the Rich Man – Jesus uses a parable to teach that earthly position and riches are not important in light of eternity. Solomon's lifestyle of excess and foreign marriages led to worship of foreign gods in an attempt to seek further earthly blessing. Solomon modeled a life that did not prioritize a life devoted to God.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned – Peter the Apostle rebuked Simon for seeking God solely for the purpose of financial gain. Solomon was blessed with financial security from God but was not satisfied. He abandoned the covenant to seek more from false gods.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The Warning of Solomon begins with a short transition from the life of King David to his successor, Solomon. We did not go into the elaborate sacrifices that Solomon made to God so that the audience does not equate these substantial sacrifices with a bribe for God's favor. Prosperity proponents could use it as a proof text to glean sacrifices from their flock with the promise of God's future guaranteed blessing. Rather, the story begins with God asking Solomon the enviable question, what did the new king want? The use of dialogue is important in this story to help the audience remember the details as well as to show the relationship God and Solomon had.

In the biblical text, Solomon refers to himself as a servant in the third person. The story is explicit, identifying King Solomon as God's humble servant.

The request for an understanding heart is literally, in Hebrew, "a hearing heart." "The heart in Hebrew, when used figuratively, refers to one's inner self, to the seat of feelings, thoughts, and impulse."¹ Some translations render it as "an understanding mind." The story crafters in consultation with the receptor audience should decide the most appropriate word or phrase. We included the word "wisdom" to supplement the phrase. The summary statement by the Lord in 1 Kgs 3:11 rephrases the sentence with "wisdom" as well.

Young Solomon's attitude and heart were pleasing to God. God lays out a conditional promise to Solomon. If Solomon follows the decrees of the covenant, he will be rewarded with legendary riches, fame, wisdom, and a long life. We have included the term "sacred

agreement," which will come up later in the story. We are intentionally using terms throughout the story set.

We have included the short narrative that demonstrates Solomon's wisdom by judging the issue with the two prostitutes. This story portion has proven to be widely reproducible and an audience favorite. Previous stories in this set have been particularly heavy, so this pithy narrative engages the audience with renewed interest.

As the story builds, our narrative is explicit regarding the women arguing in front of the king in an emotion-packed scene. The NLT says, "And so they argued back and forth before the king." (1 Kgs 3:22). Some translations are more conservative and say, "They spoke in front of the king" (ESV). We also chose to use the explicit example from the NLT for 1 Kgs 3:27, "Do not kill the child but give him to the woman who wants him to live, for she is his mother!" This provides immediate resolution to the argument between the two women and sparked Solomon's renowned wisdom.

The story transitions from the early days of Solomon's reign to the building of the temple. The Hebrew word *בַּיִת* (*bayit*) means "house, temple, the house of God."² We unpack the term as "House of Worship for God."

Chapters of 1 Kings extol King Solomon's wealth and diplomacy. The transition in this story acknowledges his wealth but then points out King Solomon's inability to manage it. An explicit statement, "Solomon did not handle his success well," summarizes this transition (1 Kings 7-11). We do not dwell on the extent of his enormous wealth lest the listeners focus simply on his financial wealth as some prosperity proponents do.

¹ Roger L. Omanson and John E. Ellington, *A Handbook on 1 & 2 Kings*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2008), 100.

² Louis Goldberg, "bayit," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. Laird Harris, et al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 105-107.

The descent of Solomon’s life accelerated as he disobeyed God and married foreign women. The Hebrew idiom “went after” in 1 Kgs 11:5 is literally “walked after” in the sense of “adhering to” or “serving.” “When this Hebrew idiom is used in reference to other gods, it carries a negative nuance.”³ The story uses a general term of “worship.” If the local language has an idiom with a similar meaning, the storyteller should consider using that term.

As the king descends into idolatry, the nation follows. We have opted to say he sacrifices close to Jerusalem rather than naming the specific site, the Mount of Olives, just outside the city. We do not go into the detail of the names of the gods (1 Kgs 11:7).

In the concluding paragraph, we have restructured the information to facilitate reproducibility (1 Kgs 11:9-13). “Torn apart” is a Hebrew idiom meaning to be taken away. Perhaps in the local language there is a culturally appropriate idiom that conveys this same meaning. The story concludes with a summary statement. This is a common discourse feature across many cultures and countries.

Background Information

Historical

Legitimation stories were a practice in historical writings found in Egypt to acknowledge the legitimacy of a prophet or important shrines. Solomon’s sacrifices at Gibeon as well as his judgment of the prostitutes are examples of legitimation writing.

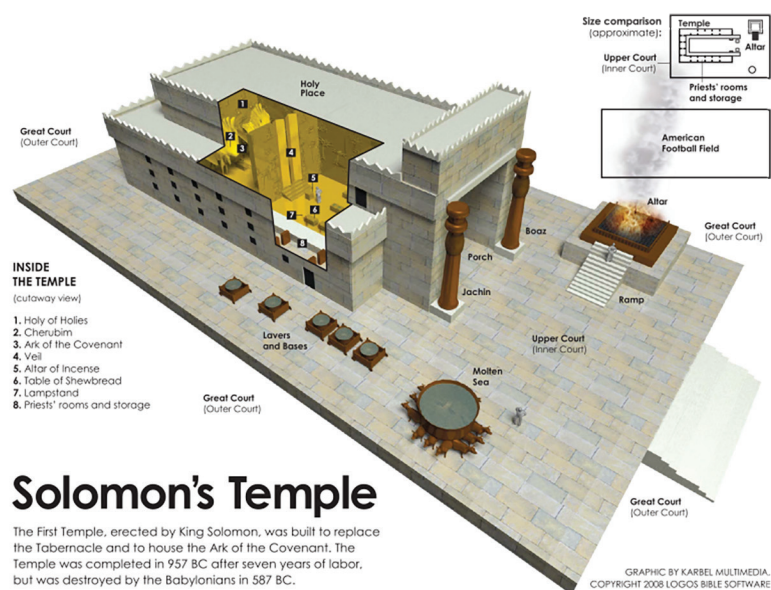
Marriage alliances have been common practice around the world for centuries. In the ancient Near East,

it was a tool of diplomacy. These alliances facilitated the end of disputes and wars. “Towns, city-states, tribes, or nations who wished to ally themselves with a ruler or come under his protection sealed the treaty with the marriage of a daughter of their chief family to the suzerain or his son. This was an act of loyalty on the part of the vassal, who would then have a personal stake in preserving the dynasty.”⁴

Figure 1 is an example of a high place of sacrifice. King Jeroboam established this particular place of sacrifice in northern Israel not long after the reign of King Solomon.

Biblical

Solomon went to sacrifice at the most prominent high place, Gibeon, because the Jerusalem temple had yet to be built (1 Kgs 3:2-3). These high places of sacrifice were used by local Canaanite inhabitants to worship their gods. Syncretism and outright worship of these false gods at these locations plagued Israel’s history. The construction of the temple served to unite Israel in one central sacrifice and worship location.



Solomon's Temple

The First Temple, erected by King Solomon, was built to replace the Tabernacle and to house the Ark of the Covenant. The Temple was completed in 957 BC after seven years of labor, but was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

³ Omanson and Ellington, *Handbook 1 and 2 Kings*, 355.

⁴ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Electronic edition.

Scripture states that Solomon went after multiple false gods (1 Kgs 11:4-7):

- Ashtoreth, a goddess of love (fertility) and war. She was the consort of Baal.
- Milcom/Molech. Scholars debate whether they are the same god who is identified by different names. This god was infamously associated with child sacrifice by fire.
- Chemosh, the national god of the Moabites that appeared to be syncretized and rival to Yahweh.

While there is scholarly debate over the number of covenants found in the Bible, there are five explicitly rendered covenants. "A covenant is an agreement that two persons or groups of persons make in which both promise either to do or not to do certain things."⁵

- The Covenant with Noah and All Creation (Gen 6:18)
- The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3, 15)
- The Mosaic Covenant (Exod 19, 20)
- The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7)
- The New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34)

King Solomon was ruling under the covenant between his father, King David, and God.

Characters

Yahweh
Solomon
The Temple
False gods

Key Terms

High Place

Special place of sacrifice "בָּמֹת bamah." The high places were common sites of worship in the ancient Near East, named after their common location at the summits of hills or ridges.⁶

House of Worship of God

Solomon's Temple - The first temple building was designed for the worship of God. King David provided many materials for this building so that his heir, Solomon, could build the temple to God's specifications by means of God-empowered artisans. It was built on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The sacred chest or ark of the covenant was placed in the inner chamber known as the Holy of Holies. Priests would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people (1 Kings 6; 2 Chr 3:1-7).

Sacred Agreement

Davidic Covenant - The covenant God made with David to establish his dynasty and ensure its continuation (2 Sam 7:8-16).⁷

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the religious act of making a gift to God or to some other powerful spiritual being to establish, maintain, or restore a proper relationship between the one offering the sacrifice and the deity. Something is given up in order to achieve a purpose. The motives may be:

- (1) to honor God and thank him for blessings received, or
- (2) more often, to obtain forgiveness for sins committed, or to get purification from uncleanness, or
- (3) to buy back a life that would otherwise have been forfeited, by substituting the life of an animal for the life of the person redeemed.⁸

⁵ Omanson and Ellington, *Handbook 1, 2 Kings*, 117.

⁶ John T. Swann, et al., eds., "High Place," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Electronic edition.

⁷ Douglas Mangum, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), Electronic edition.

⁸ Katharine Barnwell, Paul Dancy, and Anthony Pope, *Key Biblical Terms of the New Testament, An Aid for Bible Translators* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995), 358.

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Story Guide 13

Instructions for Life!

Psalm 119:33-37, 97

God's people did not always obey God, just as King Solomon did not. But God still honored his part of the sacred agreement. His faithful people loved to praise God for this and all his goodness. They composed songs and poetry to praise him. Here is a part of one of their songs:

Oh God, how I love your instructions! I think about them all day long.

Teach me, God, the way of your laws, and I will keep them to the end.

Give me the understanding to obey your instructions; I will put them into practice with my whole heart.

Make me walk the path of your commands because that is where my happiness is found!

Give me the desire for your law, **instead of a love of money!**

Do not let me pay attention to what is worthless, and give me life through your word.

***In this session, we will ask participants to make a song in their language and musical style incorporating as many lines as possible from the excerpts from Psalm 119. Participants may use a familiar or original tune.*

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

In the original language, Psalm 119 is a cleverly written acrostic Psalm, where each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is represented by eight consecutive lines. This portion of wisdom literature, which also contains verses of lament, celebrates the Torah's teaching on moral and ethical conduct. The Psalmist is not begrudging the law but embracing it with joy. This Psalm was most likely inspired by Deuteronomy and Proverbs. The maturity of the author recognizes that the Torah is a gift providing instructions for life. The author is not advocating legalism but a close relationship to God.¹

These verses from Psalm 119 celebrate the importance of the law as revealed in Scripture in context. Prosperity proponents are not interested in engaging in the discussion of prayers for a spiritual life as articulated in Psalm 119. The author's cry out to God is contradictory to the man-centered tenets of prosperity theology. The poet wants God's help so he can be obedient to the law God established. This devout poet knows he will find true happiness when walking the path of God's commands, not when he has financial security. The author of Psalm 119 prayed for something never heard in a prosperity pulpit. He prayed for a desire for the law instead of the love of money, and not to focus on materialistic things.

Prosperity proponents focus on the man-centered agenda. When proof-texting does not suffice, modern-day prophets declare a new word from God. "Another aspect of authority lies in the common practice of pronouncing Revelation Knowledge or Word of Knowledge. In these cases, the bearer claims special revelation from God. The revelation may be a new or alternative interpretation of Scripture. Or it may provide some guidance for the congregation, usually as a course of action to be taken or a miracle to come."² The prophets wear expensive designer suits, watches, and shoes, as well as drive luxury cars. All to reinforce their ideology that their own prosperity is proof enough. Their false gospel proclaims that people should follow their lifestyle and social media presence. Their brand

of success says you can have this too... Just send in your donations and seed money for God to bless.

Acknowledging the challenge of crafting a Psalm into a narrative, in this session we invite the storyteller to incorporate a crafted song based on the chosen verses. This oral reinforcement will help the storyteller and audience to remember the verses. Orality is larger than storytelling. Music plays an important role in oral-preference learning.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – The giving of the law and the establishment of the covenant prepared the audience for **Instructions for Life**. Moses's intercession story served as an origin story pointing out that God's presence and the relationship with him are fundamental.

Temptation of Jesus – King Jesus is focused not on physical needs, nor success in this world, but devotion only to the one true God.

Parable of the Rich Fool – Jesus continued his teaching through narrative as he masterfully showed that a preoccupation with wealth is meaningless in the bigger context of eternity.

Healing at the Temple – Peter and John were not men of wealth but gave the beggar what they did have, faith in Jesus.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned – Simon was only interested in what the Holy Spirit could give him supernaturally, thus making his services more lucrative.

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering – Paul took the opportunity to write out a warning to his disciple Timothy that contentment is found in God alone and will entail suffering in this life.

¹ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary 21 (Dallas, TX: Word, Inc., 2002), 184.

² Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, MO: CreateSpace, 2017), 138.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

We have chosen verses from Psalm 119 to be a short narrative introducing music as a form of orality. We recommend that participants create a song in their own language and musical style based on these non-narrative verses. Orality also incorporates other arts such as dance, music, art, and drama to share truths. Just as the Psalter wrote the original text in a memorable way for his audience, stories, psalms and other passages can be more meaningful set to music or the preferred artistic, oral style.

We begin with verse 97 of Psalm 119 as it best reflects the heart of the longest chapter in the book of Psalms.³ Verse 97 sets the context for the narrative and serves as a natural transition.

Instructions for Life follows the pattern of Psalm 119 and intentionally employs imperative sentences seeking God's assistance for a holy life. Petition is the central theme for the verses in this story.

While the Psalmist could ask for anything, he seeks instruction and understanding to know God and his law best. "Torah" (tôrâ) is generally rendered "law, regulation, instruction, teaching," and was originally used to describe the instructions for conduct that God gave his people. Eventually, other meanings developed for this word.

The Psalmist asked God to teach him the ways of the statutes or decrees. The phrase "to the end" can be understood as an idiom meaning "as a reward." If the local language has a similar idiom, the story crafter could use that. We have

opted to go with "to the end" as it is a phrase used to describe one's lifelong dedication to the Lord in many places in Africa.⁴

"Give me understanding" is an echo of the previous verse. Repetition is helpful for oral audiences to remember the story. When translated, if the term "heart" does not represent the whole person, change the wording to fit that language and culture.

The remainder of this short story are requests to the Lord for direction and the correct attitude. He asks for focus on the important areas of life rather than things that hold no value.⁵ "Make me walk the path of your commands" is an acknowledgment that this is not naturally intuitive to us. We need divine help, and the result is true happiness.

We have used the phrase from the New Living Translation rendering of verse 36: "Give me the desire for your law, instead of a love of money!" This concrete wording is intentional to speak to those who would be tempted to trust in riches rather than God's provision.

The concrete wording is also intentional for Ps 119:37. Recognizing that the impulse toward materialism often comes through looking at what others have, the Psalmist prays that God will turn his eyes away from worthless things (Ps 119:37).⁶ For an immature believer, this would almost seem contradictory. Heart transformation births maturity.

³ Mark D. Futato, "The Book of Psalms," in *The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary v.7 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 372.

⁴ William A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary v.5, eds., Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 867.

⁵ Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 1008.

⁶ Nupanga Weanzana et al., *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 743.

Background Information

Biblical

Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic in the original language, Hebrew. This was most likely a memory aid that would help the congregation to recite it. It would be recited at the Feast of the Weeks, also called the Feast of Pentecost. This festival celebrated 50 days after Passover and the departure of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. It also celebrated the giving of the law from God to his people at Mt. Sinai.⁷

All 176 verses of Psalm 119 appeal to or address God.

In Psalm 119, seven Hebrew words are synonymously interchanged with the word *tôrâ* (translated below as *instruction*), which itself is used twenty-five times in the psalm. The lemma, or root of the word in the sense of Law/Torah, is used 219 times.⁸

The different words are:

- *'ēdâ*, translated here as "decree" (used 23 times)
- *mišpāṭ*, "ordinance" (23 times)
- *ḥōq*, "statute" (22 times)
- *dābār*, "word" (22 times)
- *mišwâ*, "commandment" (22 times)
- *piqqûd*, "precept" (21 times)
- *'imrâ*, "promise" (19 times)⁹

Characters

The Psalmist

The author is unknown. It was written most likely post exile.

The Torah/The Law

Instruction, rule, law, the Hebrew name given to the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. "Tôrâ is primarily a way of life derived from the covenant relationship between God and Israel."¹⁰

God

⁷ Nancy deClaissé-Walford, "Book Five of the Psalter: Psalms 107-150," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 870.

⁸ Bible Sense Lexicon (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2020), Electronic edition.

⁹ Nancy deClaissé-Walford, "Book Five of the Psalter," 871.

¹⁰ Merrill Chapin Tenney and Moisés Silva, eds., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 5 [Q-Z]* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 896.

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Story Guide 14

Elijah and the False Prophets

1 Kings 18:18-40

After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two rival kingdoms. Their kings followed the example of Solomon and worshiped the false gods of the area and ignored the sacred agreement between God and his people. One of these kings was Ahab. He married a foreign wife. He led God's people to worship the foreign gods. He built idols. He even allowed the spokesmen of God to be killed!

There was one spokesman for God, Elijah, who refused to worship the false gods. During a terrible three-and-a-half-year drought, Elijah confronted King Ahab. He challenged the king, "Call ALL of Israel to the mountain, as well as the false prophets! We will see who the true God is."

The king agreed. He summoned the people of Israel and the false prophets to the mountain. Elijah asked the people of Israel, "How much longer will you go back and forth between our God, Yahweh, and these false gods? If Yahweh is God, follow him! But if this false god, Baal, is God, then follow him!"

Elijah said to the people, "Bring two bulls. Let the false prophets choose one bull to make a sacrifice to your god. Cut it into pieces. Lay it on the wood of the altar to your god, but do not light the fire. I will take the other bull, prepare it, and put it on the altar for Yahweh. I will not light the fire." Elijah told the false prophets, "Call and pray to your god, and I will call and pray to our God, Yahweh. The God who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!" The people of Israel agreed to this test.

The prophets of Baal prepared the bull as instructed. They began to pray and cry out to Baal from morning until noon, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" No answer. They began their ceremonial dance around the altar.

Elijah started mocking them. "You will have to shout louder. He is probably just busy, or in the toilet! Maybe he is away on a trip or

just sleeping!" The false prophets shouted louder, danced with more frenzy, and even cut themselves with knives until the blood gushed out. This continued all afternoon until evening but with no response from their god.

Then Elijah called to the Israelite people, "Come over here!" They watched as Elijah repaired the old altar of God that was torn down. Elijah brought stones, piled up wood on the altar, then placed the meat of the bull on it. He then poured twelve jars of water on the meat and wood!

Elijah then walked up to the altar. He simply prayed, "O Yahweh, God of our ancestors, prove today that you are God in Israel. O God, answer me so these people will know that you, O Yahweh, are God."

Immediately, the fire of God flashed down from heaven and burned up the bull, the wood, the stones, and all the water that had run off. When the people saw it, they fell to the ground in humble respect and cried out, "Yahweh, he is God! Yahweh, he is God!" Elijah ordered, "Seize all the false prophets. Do not let anyone escape!" They were put to death.

Afterward, God sent rain to Israel and ended the terrible drought.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Decades after King Solomon reigned over Israel, subsequent kings followed his pattern of covenant breaking. King Ahab married a foreign wife. This compromise led to the worship of her pagan gods and the desecration of the altars of God.

The worship of Baal, the god known as the storm god and the rain bringer, was an attempt to manipulate the rainfall that crops in an arid Middle East climate required. Rainfall equates to bountiful harvests, fertility, and prosperity. Israel grew more interested in their present prosperity than the covenant relationship with God, their true provider.

This same prosperity spirit appeals to the greed of people today. Prosperity preachers resemble the false prophets of Elijah's day. They seek the immediate blessing rather than the blessing. Parishioners engage in hypercharismatic "combat prayers," where they shout their demands at God. Their worship resembles the frantic worship of the false prophets of Baal in an attempt to manipulate their god to do what they want. Pursuing their best life now, of health and wealth, supersedes a faithful relationship with God in his sovereignty.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – Elijah pleaded to the king and the people of Israel to return to the covenant relationship with God originally made through Moses.

The Warning from Solomon – King Ahab followed the model of Solomon. He married a foreign wife, took on the gods of that culture, and built altars to that god in Israel.

Capture of the Sacred Chest – Israel turned away from God, and the priesthood was corrupted by the sons of Eli. Israel went to battle with the Philistines. In an attempt to manipulate God, they brought the ark of the covenant to the battlefield only to lose the battle, thousands of men, and the ark.

Parable of the Rich Fool – Jesus warned in this parable not to store up earthly abundance that leads to neglecting your relationship with God. King Ahab led the people of Israel to neglect their relationship with their covenant God and venerate gods that could be manipulated for better crops and abundance.

Call to Suffer – Elijah chose to suffer in a servant leader position. The queen murdered Elijah's fellow prophets, but Elijah did not neglect his calling, even under threat of death. He boldly confronted King Ahab. With his sacrifice challenge, he risked his reputation in front of all of Israel.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The book of 1 Kings chronicles the lives of the kings of God's people, Israel, beginning with King David in his old age and his successor Solomon. The introduction of **Elijah and the False Prophets** quickly transitions from the reign of Solomon to nearly 100 years later when King Ahab repeats the same covenant-breaking offenses. We have chosen to use Ahab's name for authenticity. It is widely known in the Judeo-Christian traditions in Africa and around the world.

The key biblical term for covenant is reiterated as "sacred agreement" and was introduced in previous Moses stories.

The sentences describing Ahab's grievous offenses are intentionally short so that they are memorable for the audience. Note the use of the word "gods" as plural. First Kings 18:19 points out that the prophets of Baal and Asherah were summoned. These specifically are the prophets attached to and financially supported by Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel. For the sake of reproducibility of the story, we have not included the names of the gods and Ahab's wife. More than three new proper nouns can limit reproducibility and audience comprehension.

The prophet Elijah is introduced as a spokesman. This intentional turn of phrase is to help the audience outside the church to understand the biblical definition of *prophet*. He is not a fortune teller predicting the future. He is not like prophets from other holy books or traditions. He speaks on behalf of God to his people.

In 1 Kgs 18:1 we see that the story takes place "in the third year of the drought." Luke 4:25 and Jas 5:17 give a more specific accounting that the drought lasted for three and a half years. We chose to include this specific detail because the audiences in Africa and around the world can identify with a lengthy drought and the consequential effects.

Scripture in 1 Kgs 18:19 specifies that there were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. In the provided story, we did not include the names of both deities and their numbers. We chose the general term false prophets. For the purposes of reproducibility, we did not use the proper noun name for Mount Carmel. Mount Carmel may not be a known geographical area outside the region.

The crafted story states, "How much longer will you go back and forth between our God Yahweh and these false gods?" In 1 Kgs 18:21, translations such as NLT or ESV use "hobbling" or "limping between two different opinions?" The Hebrew word picture portrays someone balancing on crutches cut from tree branches. If the storyteller's language has an equivalent idiom that means not choosing a side, or "sitting on the fence," it can be used here.

In English translations of the biblical texts, "LORD" in all caps is often used for YHWH, the covenant name of the God of Israel. We are using "Yahweh" for clarification purposes for the audience.

The author of 1 Kings uses idioms to express Elijah's mocking of the false prophets. We have rendered "busy" for the concept of daydreaming/occupied with thoughts. Their pleas went on through the evening sacrifice, which was at about 3 p.m. We are careful in the story to say, "into the afternoon" and not "until evening." This could be misunderstood by an audience unfamiliar with the times of daily sacrifices.

Elijah prayed, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." We opted to say, "the God of our ancestors," rather than add extra proper nouns to the story. Also for the sake of simplicity, this story is not crafted to include Elijah's pleas to be justified as God's servant.

The term "fell on his face" means to bow down or even prostrate oneself. It is a display of humble respect. The storyteller may prefer a more culturally appropriate term for this reverence in

a local language. It should be clear that he did not stumble and fall.

We have chosen to include Elijah's order to seize and put to the death the false prophets. This event was a showdown to the death. Jezebel had thousands of prophets of God killed.¹ Storytellers should be sensitive to their audience, particularly in extremist areas. This story should never motivate modern audiences to violence or retaliation.

Verses 41–45 are summarized for the sake of brevity, that God sent rain to end the drought and to serve as the conclusion to the narrative.

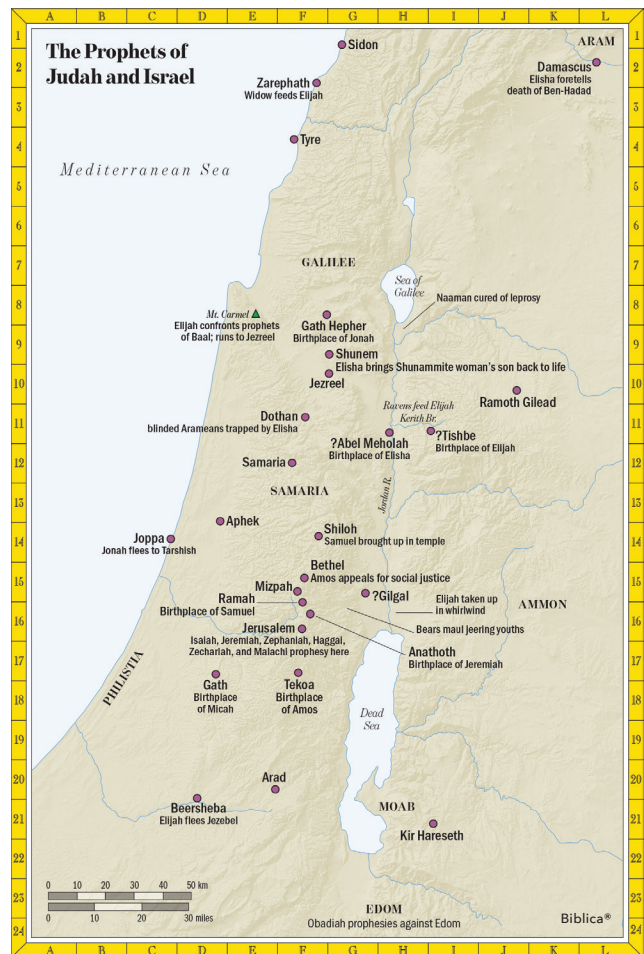
Background Information

Historical

Baal was the chief pagan god in the ancient Near East. He was reputed to be the storm god, the bringer of rain. The people relied on him for fertility of crops, animals, and themselves. His followers often believed that sexual acts performed in his temple would boost Baal's sexual prowess, and thus contribute to his work in increasing fertility.²

Asherah was a pagan goddess, consort to Baal. She was the goddess of fertility and war. The noun form of "asherah" is used more frequently in the biblical text as a sacred pole, tree, or object that is used in worship.³

The water jar or pitcher mentioned in 1 Kings 18 would have been small, the size that a



woman could carry on her shoulders. It most likely held only a few gallons.⁴

Biblical

Elijah's evening sacrifice to God was understood to be the sacrifice or gift of grain. This is also known as the cereal offering. Half of the cereal offering was offered to God in the morning, the other half in the evening (Lev 6:20).

¹ William H. Barnes, *1-2 Kings*. Cornerstone Biblical Commentary v. 4B, ed. Phillip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2012), 157.

² Winfried Corduan, "Baal" in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, eds. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Electronic edition.

³ Eric Tully, "Asherah," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, eds. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Electronic edition.

⁴ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1977), Electronic edition.

Characters

King Ahab

Elijah

False Prophets

God, Yahweh

People of Israel

Key Terms

Altar

In 1 Kings 18 “altar” is defined as stones (*mizbah ‘abānîm*) upon which to sacrifice their offerings.⁵

God/Yahweh

The sacred private name YHWH has been considered by Jews too holy to even speak aloud lest they take his name in vain. They say, “the Lord,” in place of YHWH. This tradition began after the Babylonian exile. Modern translators suggest that LORD is a title, not his name. In this story the name “Yahweh” is added to God for clarification in the showdown between him and Baal.

Idol

A pagan object that represents a spirit or a god and is constructed by human hands for the purpose of worship, service, or great respect.

Sacred agreement

The conditional covenant between God and the Israelites established the new nation. It is an agreement between God and a person that has binding ramifications from one or both parties. Often one party had a higher status.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the religious act of making a gift to God or to some other powerful spiritual being in order to establish, maintain, or restore a proper relationship between the one offering the sacrifice and the deity. Something is given up to achieve a purpose. The motives may be (1) to honor God and thank him for blessings received, or

(2) more often, to obtain forgiveness for sins committed, or to get purification from uncleanness, or

(3) to buy back a life that would otherwise have been forfeited, by substituting the life of an animal for the life of the person redeemed.⁶

Spokesman

Choose a term for “prophet” that adequately describes the prophet’s function. A prophet

1. receives a call from God,
2. takes God’s message to men because he has been given it by God himself, and
3. has only one priority: bringing the Word of God to men.

We chose “spokesman” because, in English, it can convey these three meanings but doesn’t carry the unwanted connotation of a fortune-teller. If you use a religious term, be sure that it has meaning that the average hearer will understand.⁷

⁵ James McKeown and Terence Croft Mitchell, et. al., eds., “Altar,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 26.

⁶ Katharine Barnwell, Paul Dancy, and Anthony Pope, *Key Biblical Terms of the New Testament, An Aid for Bible Translators* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995), 331-338.

⁷ Stephen Stringer, *Storying Training 4 Trainers* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 70.

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Story Guide 15

The Suffering Savior

Isaiah 53

After the time of Elijah, God's people continued to sin and disobey God. But God did not forget his people. He sent a spokesman, Isaiah, to give them a message of hope. He told them: God is going to send us a Savior who will never do anything wrong.

Even though he does nothing wrong, people will still reject him and treat him badly. He will suffer. He is going to carry our burdens and our sorrow. He will be whipped, beaten, and broken to bring us peace and make us whole.

We people are like sheep who stray away. We wander off God's path. We sin and disobey God. But God is putting all our sins onto this Savior. In fact, he is like a lamb that is being led to the slaughter. He is not going to say anything. He will not defend himself even though he is innocent.

He will suffer and take our punishment for our sins and die, but he will see his life again. Because of his sacrifice, many people will have a right relationship with God.

That is the message about the Suffering Savior that Isaiah gave to the people. From that time on, the people waited expectantly for this Suffering Savior to come.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The hope of reconciliation with God comes with a price. The story of the Suffering Savior unpacks Isaiah 53 and the promise of this Savior. He is to bear our sin, and that sacrifice requires suffering.

Isaiah 53 is fundamental to the word of faith doctrine. It is usually quoted from the KJV, verse 5: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." This verse is interpreted to mean that with positive confession and the right force of faith, one is healed immediately, as if God always heals when the correct formula is uttered or shouted. The issue with the word of faith interpretation is that the context from Isa 53:4 is ignored: "Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins!" (NLT) Word of faith teachers apply the text to physical healing rather than spiritual. But the apostle Peter wrote centuries later about Jesus's fulfillment of the prophet's words: "He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed" (1 Pet 2:24 NLT).

The Suffering Savior narrative prepares the people of God to understand that this Savior brings with him a radical, fundamental shift in popular thinking. In the New Testament narrative, Christ calls his people to be prepared to suffer. Followers will challenge society with their obedience to Christ rather than loyalty to health and wealth this side of eternity.

Story practitioners are encouraged to create a song based on Isaiah 53. If a dirge or lament song is a feature in local musical culture, it would be appropriate to craft lyrics from the text.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Disobedience – The promise of the one who will come and crush the head of the evil one was prophesied. The promise has not been forgotten.

God Chose Abraham – God promised his people that the Savior would come. Isaiah reminded God's people that this suffering servant was truly coming.

The Birth of Jesus – The fulfillment of the prophecy 700 years earlier was realized in the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Suffering of Jesus (crucifixion) – Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, suffering physical and mental abuse followed by an unjust trial. Condemned to death, he did not argue with the authorities about the verdict.

Resurrection – The prophecy was fulfilled upon the resurrection.

Call to Suffer – The Servant Savior modeled that in this world there will be suffering, and his children should be aware of the cost.

Sufferings of Paul – The apostle Paul, who was faithful in delivering the message of the Savior, suffered during his years of service.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Commentaries agree that this passage refers to a future event. Prophetic past tense is used often in translations but refers to a future event. We have changed the tense of the verbs to the future to reflect more accurately the meaning and to simplify the story for our audience.

Isaiah 53 is one of the four “Servant Songs” and presents a story crafting challenge. The example narrative is purposefully concise. The told story will be between 70–90 seconds long. In community testing, this brevity has proven to be important to maintain the integrity of the biblical story content with the goal of audience reproducibility in mind. The story title is an intentional choice to be explicit about the coming Savior.

In the introduction of the story, the message of hope is revealed as a special Savior. This Savior is not like the patriarchs Abraham, Moses, or David. This one is different as he will have never done anything wrong (Isa 53:9). Taken out of order, this verse aids in the comprehension of the storyline and piques the interest of the audience.

Note the second paragraph begins the same way the previous paragraph ends. While this seems redundant, it is an intentional mnemonic device. This is a common discourse feature found in narrative across language groups throughout sub-Saharan Africa and around the world.

Scholars agree that suffering and this Savior will be synonymous. The detail of this suffering is the key to the story. We add the word “broken” to contrast the Hebrew word picture of being made whole. Often the term “peace” is used for *Shalom*. It does not fully express the meaning

of shalom in verse 5 and is best described as well-being or wholeness.¹

There are two sheep metaphors in the story. The first helps to illustrate disobedience. The following sentence explains it. “We sin and disobey God.” Our complicity is explicit in the suffering of the Savior. If the metaphor is challenging for the audience, it can just be stated, “We wander off God’s path.” The second sheep metaphor alludes to an unblemished, year-old lamb for sacrifice that is heading toward death. If this metaphor fails in testing, one can substitute “He will be led to die.” We caution against using the term *meat market* or *butcher* as it may lead the audience to think it was an animal for food.

Through extensive community testing, we have made explicit, “He is not going to say anything. He will not defend himself even though he is innocent.”

Suffering is the most accurate term for the abuse of the Savior.² The example story states explicitly that the Savior will die. Figurative language runs the risk of misinterpretation. It is made clear in the story that the Savior could not have survived the brutality. In verse 10, there is scholarly debate about how the Savior will see descendants and if it is a reference to the resurrection. It is not explicit in the biblical text. Oswalt explains, however, “whether Isaiah intends to speak of resurrection or not, this much is clear, as Westermann points out: it is only on the other side of the Servant’s death that his deliverance and ours may be realized.”³

We have unpacked the term righteousness as a right relationship with God. Community testing and observation has consistently proven that righteousness is a misunderstood and misused term.

¹ Graham S. Ogden and Jan Sterk, *A Handbook on Isaiah*, 2 vols., UBS Handbook Series (Reading, UK: United Bible Societies, 2011), 1510.

² Ogden and Sterk, *Isaiah*, 1522.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 396.

Background Information

Historical

The Babylonian empire celebrated the new year with the custom of their king submitting to being slapped in the face. Matthews explains: "On the fifth day of the eleven-day festival, the king was taken before the high priest, who stripped the monarch of his royal insignias (mace, loop, and scepter) and struck him on the cheeks. The priest then dragged the king by his ears and forced him to bow to the ground before Marduk, again proclaiming his innocence."⁴

In the ancient Near East, cultures performed substitutionary rites. This occurred in Assyria if perceived evil omens appeared, such as an eclipse.

Biblical

There are four passages in Isaiah known as the Servant Songs. These songs or poems illustrate the various attributes of the coming Savior:

Isa 42:1-9 the justice he brings to the nations

Isa 49:1-13 the blessing to his people Israel and the light to the world

Isa 50:4-11 the qualified servant who endures undeserved suffering

Isa 52:13-53:12 the suffering servant who is a willing sacrifice and is ultimately triumphant

Characters

Isaiah

Savior

God

Suffering

Key Terms

Righteousness/Right Relationship

The Old Testament idea of righteousness is based on the relationship between God and



An Assyrian relief panel depicts a king. Gallery 404 New York Metropolitan Museum. Public Domain.

man, or between man and man. Righteousness refers to holiness. The CEV translates this concept in Isa 53:11 in the following way: "he will take the punishment for the sins of others, so that many of them will no longer be guilty. In other words, 'righteousness' takes away our guilt."⁵

Spokesman

Choose a term for "prophet" that adequately describes the prophet's function. A prophet

1. receives a call from God,
2. takes God's message to men because he had been given it by God himself, and
3. has only one priority: bringing the Word of God to men.

We chose "spokesman" because, in English, it can convey these three meanings but doesn't carry the unwanted connotation of a fortune-teller. If you use a religious term, be sure that it has an accurate meaning that the average hearer will understand.⁶

⁴ Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Electronic edition.

⁵ Stephen Stringer, *Storying Training 4 Trainers* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 69.

⁶ Stringer, *Storying Training*, 70.

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Story Guide 16

Suffering Because of Obedience, Jeremiah

Jeremiah 1:4-8; 11; 15-19; 21:3ff; 23:3-5; 27; 37:1-38:6

Years after Isaiah foretold about the Suffering Savior, God gave a message to a new spokesman. God said, "Jeremiah, I chose you before you were born to be my messenger. Go where I send you and say what I tell you." Jeremiah replied, "O LORD God, I can't speak for you! I'm too young!" God replied, "Don't say, 'I'm too young.' Leaders of the country will fight against you and abuse you, but don't be afraid of them. I am with you."

God told Jeremiah, "Tell my people, 'Because you have worshiped idols and broken the sacred agreement, another nation will come to attack you and take you away from your land. Turn away from this evil and do what is right.'" But the people refused to repent, to regret and turn away from their disobedience. God responded by saying, "I will punish your sins, but because of our sacred agreement, one day I will return my people to this land, and I will send my people a Savior."

Jeremiah proclaimed the message God gave him. He was beaten and imprisoned. But Jeremiah continued to faithfully tell God's message. Just as he said, the enemy came and attacked Jerusalem and then left. Jeremiah warned the king, "God says, 'The enemy will return to Jerusalem, capture it and burn it down!'" Jeremiah tried to leave the city to deal with his family's property, but he was arrested instead. A city guard accused him of deserting to join with the enemy. Jeremiah was beaten and thrown into an underground prison for many days. When he was finally brought before the king, Jeremiah begged, "Please, don't put me back down there, or I will die." The king moved him to a different prison.

Despite the suffering, Jeremiah did not stop telling God's message to the people. He said, "This is what God says 'If you surrender to the attackers, you will live. But if you stay in the city, you will die.'" When the officials heard this, they went to the king and said, "This is treason! He must be put to death!" The officials arrested Jeremiah. They put him in a muddy water pit and left him there to suffer. The king later moved him to a different prison.

Just as God said through Jeremiah, the invaders attacked Jerusalem. They captured it and burned it down. God's people who survived the attacks were taken away as prisoners into exile. Jeremiah, who was faithful to speaking God's message, was taken away to Egypt.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The Book of Jeremiah is a message of inevitable accountability and judgment on God's people. They have consistently broken the covenant/sacred agreement and turned to idol worship. God chose Jeremiah to warn his people of the coming consequences of this disobedience. This story looks at the challenging life of the faithful prophet.

God set apart Jeremiah for the task of taking his message to the nations (Jer 1:5). This task though was not one where Jeremiah, the prophet, was honored or financially rewarded. In fact, his life of faithfulness was a series of hardships and suffering. The people he tried to warn, ridiculed him. The leaders extracted their frustration in forms of torture and isolation to silence the prophet and his word from God.

Today's prosperity doctrine has little resemblance to the life of the weeping prophet Jeremiah. Modern-day "gospel-preneurs" reject the biblical reality of suffering while being obedient. Ironically, they frequently reference Jer 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (ESV). Welfare is sometimes translated as "prosper" (GNB) or a future of success (CEV). The prosperity doctrine takes this "prosper" out of context and stretches it to mean a variety of blessings in family dynamics, monetary reward, and interpersonal relationships. Prosperity doctrine ignores the context of what God was speaking about to Jeremiah. Pastor David Platt explains:

"The context of Jeremiah 29 makes it crystal clear that suffering is a reality for God's people in this fallen world and that God's people will not escape it. But God says to His people, 'In the middle of suffering, I promise to enable you to endure it.' God does not promise in His Word that suffering will end in a short time."¹

The example story demonstrates that Jeremiah himself did not experience material prosperity. Jeremiah was content to look forward to the time when his people would return to Jerusalem and to the coming Savior that God promised.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – This was the introduction to the sacred agreement. God's people accepted it but failed to keep it soon thereafter. God warned of impending judgment. This happened with the destruction of the temple and the exile of Jeremiah's time.

Capture of the Sacred Chest – God warned his people to turn away from idols and honor the sacred agreement. He allowed Israel's enemies to defeat them in battles and even carry off the sacred chest or ark of the covenant as spoils of war. Israel could not control God or force him to do their will.

The Warning from Solomon – Jeremiah brought a warning that God's people should repent from idol worship and renew the covenant with him. God's people refused to repent, and enemy invaders razed the temple that Solomon built.

Elijah and the False Prophets – The prophet Elijah called God's people to choose between idols or Yahweh and to renew the covenant.

Suffering Savior – The prophet Isaiah told of a Savior who would come to reconcile people to God by bearing all our sin and disobedience.

Suffering of Jesus – The Savior Jesus came and fulfilled all prophecies and bore the sin of mankind. He chose a life that ended in cruel suffering to redeem man back to God.

Sufferings of Paul – Paul carried a message so important that he repeatedly suffered rather than remain silent. Obedient Christians are sometimes called to suffer.

¹ David Platt, "Does Jeremiah 29:11 Guarantee Us Health and Prosperity?" December 2, 2021, <https://radical.net/article/does-jeremiah-2911-guarantee-us-health-and-prosperity>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Jeremiah was an eyewitness to the rebellion and punishment of Judah. In vain, he warned of invaders and witnessed the destruction of the temple. He endured physical and emotional abuse as he declared God's message to the Israelites. The story of Jeremiah is a composite story drawing from both the narrative and poetry of the book. His story of faithfulness is demonstrated in his obedience and suffering over the course of his 40 years of ministry.

Composite stories can be challenging to retell. The example story is intentionally brief. The symbolic actions of Jeremiah are not included in this story for the sake of clarity.

The introduction of the story transitions from the prophetic words of the **Suffering Savior** story to the new young prophet Jeremiah. He is specifically chosen to deliver a difficult message. Note that God's words are in poetic language while Jeremiah's responses are in a more common prose. The use of dialogue in the story helps form a visual of the communication going on between characters. Dialogue is a common language feature in African narratives and around the world and is used as a mnemonic device or memory aid.

We have opted to use the generic term "message" rather than a phrase such as "word from the Lord." While that is the literal Hebrew wording, word of faith practitioners have commanded this phrase to declare their so-called prophetic words.²

The people who fought against Jeremiah were the Israelite leadership. As storytellers put this story in the local language, be careful that Jeremiah is not thought to be fighting the foreign invaders, but God's very own people. God promised that he will be with Jeremiah in

the difficulty of this assignment. God never said that he will take Jeremiah out of the difficulty.

We have made explicit the chief complaint against Israel, as found in Jeremiah 11, being the broken covenant and idol worship. This is a consistent theme throughout this story set and Scripture itself. We continue to use the same terminology as in previous stories, "sacred agreement" and "Savior." Using consistent terms throughout a story set aids in accurate comprehension and reproducibility.

In the story we do not go into the details of the invading nation, Babylon, nor the greater power struggle with Assyrian and Egyptian forces. This story refers to Babylon as the invader, enemy, or nation. Incorporating proper nouns, especially those not repeated in subsequent stories, potentially limits reproducibility by the general audience. See Background Information below for more details about the exile.

We felt it important to include the detail that Jeremiah proclaimed the message of Jeremiah 20 in front of the temple, the House of Worship. ("House of Worship" is the consistent term used throughout the story set for the temple.) The temple, although a building, was and is a central character of Israel. It was later razed to the ground, an unbelievable event.

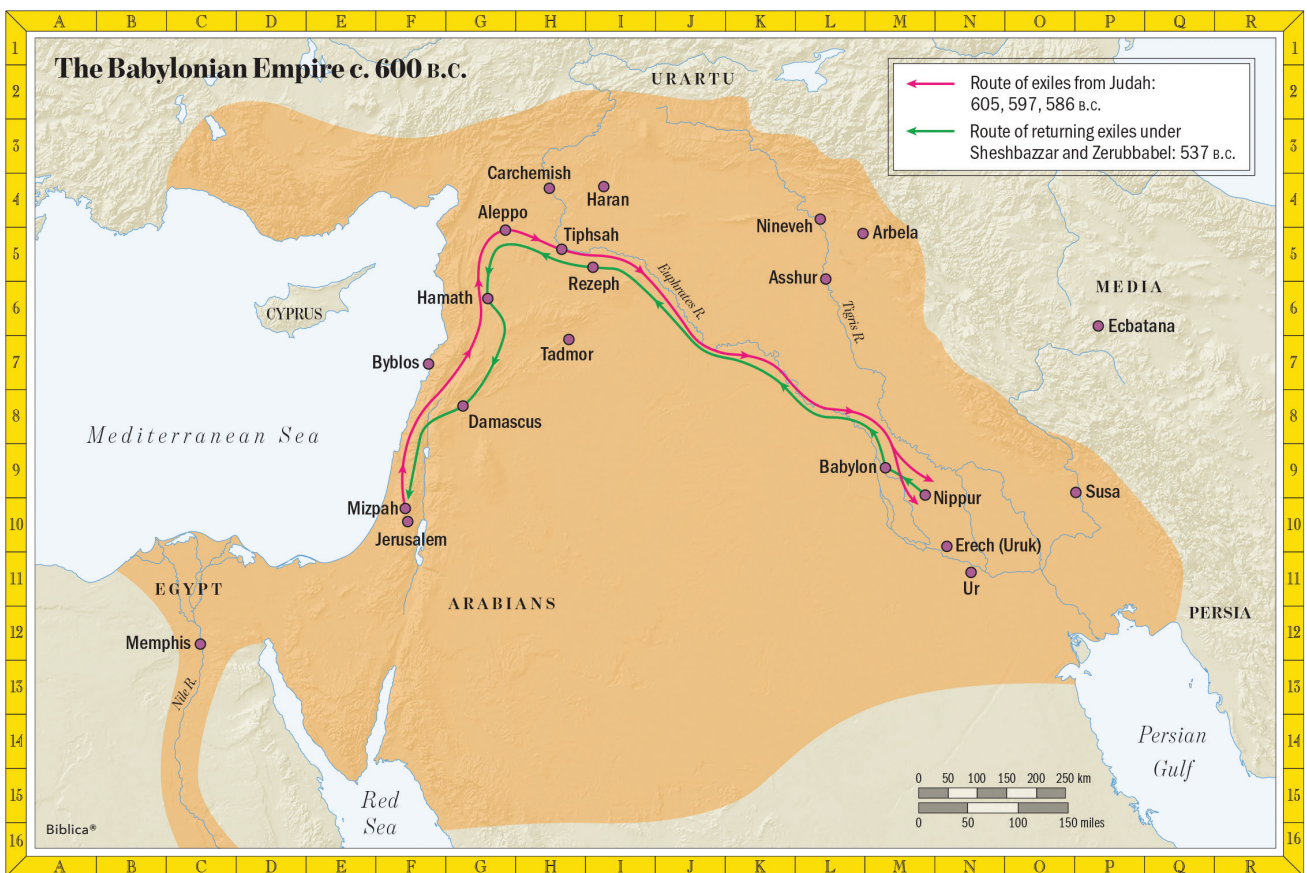
The story again refers to the Babylonians as the enemy.

The detail of Jeremiah attempting to regulate a land issue is a common responsibility of an adult man in Africa and around the world. The audience can relate to this issue, and thus it is retained in the story.

In Jer 37:15, Jeremiah was imprisoned again. Scholars agree the Hebrew text is challenging here, but Jeremiah's confinement was a form of an underground prison.³ The word "dungeon"

² Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, MO: Author, 2017), Kindle edition.

³ John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 634.



is not widely known by the modern audience. Descriptive language unpacks the term in the example story. If the local language has a word for this form of detainment, it can be substituted here.

Note the continued theme of suffering as seen in the previous story of Isaiah 53, the Suffering Savior. Suffering will also be a theme in the subsequent New Testament stories where Jesus told his followers to expect suffering. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul experienced it.

A group of important men and state officials accused Jeremiah of treason. Some translations use “princes,” but “officials” is a more accurate term.⁴

The conclusion summarizes the fulfillment of God’s warning as spoken to the prophet Jeremiah. We felt it important to be explicit about

the exile. Like most people in Judah, Jeremiah too was taken away to a foreign land, most likely against his will.

Background Information

Historical

Kingdom of Babylon

Babylon was a powerful kingdom. Its principal city was less than 50 miles from the modern-day city of Baghdad, Iraq. It is mentioned in Genesis 11 as the site of the infamous tower of Babel. Babylonians were also referred to as Chaldeans in Scripture. Babylon became the most powerful kingdom in the world when it defeated Assyria in 612 BC.

Cistern

A hand dug reservoir for water collection. It was dug out from stone or was a natural water catchment.

⁴ Barclay M. Newman Jr. and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on Jeremiah*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2003), 745.

Biblical

Exile

The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into exile (gālâ) by the Assyrians around 722 BC (2 Kgs 15:29; 2 Kgs 18:11), and the southern kingdom of Judah was taken into exile (gālâ) by the Babylonians around 586 BC (2 Kgs 25:11, 21; 1 Chr 6:15).⁵

Jeremiah served as a prophet for the last five kings of Judah:

1. The days of Josiah (630–609 BC)
2. Jehoahaz, son of Josiah, king for only three months, taken as prisoner to Egypt
3. Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, vassal of Egypt, (609–598 BC) taken into exile by Babylon (2 Chr 36:4)
4. Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, reigned three months and ten days, taken into exile to Babylon (2 Chr 36:9)
5. Zedekiah (597–586 BC), uncle of Jehoiachin (2 Chr 36:10)

Jeremiah was taken against his will to Egypt. Scholars think Jeremiah died around 570 BC.

Prophetic actions:

Much of Jeremiah's pronouncements from God came in the form of what can be considered performance art or symbolic actions.

- Jer 13:1–11: The linen loincloth
- Jer 19:1–12: Broken clay jars
- Jer 27:2–11: The Yoke
- Jer 32:6–25: The purchased field

Characters

Jeremiah

God

King

House of Worship/Temple

Officials

Key Terms

House of Worship of God

Solomon's Temple – The first temple building was designed for the worship of God. King David provided many materials for this building so that his heir, Solomon, could build the temple to God's specifications by means of God-empowered artisans. It was built on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant was placed in the inner chamber known as the Holy of Holies or the most holy place. Priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people (1 Kgs 6; 2 Chr 3:1–7).

Idol

A pagan object that represents a spirit or a god and is constructed by human hands for the purpose of worship, service, or great respect.

Sacred Agreement

The conditional covenant between God and the Israelites established the new nation. It was an agreement between God and a person that had binding ramifications from one or both parties. Often one party had a higher status.

Spokesman

Choose a term for "prophet" that adequately describes the prophet's function. A prophet

1. receives a call from God,
2. takes God's message to men because he has been given it by God himself, and
3. has only one priority: bringing the Word of God to men.

We chose "spokesman" because, in English, it can convey these three meanings but doesn't carry the unwanted connotation of a fortune-teller. If you use a religious term, be sure that it has meaning that the average hearer will understand.⁶

⁵ Benjamin M. Austin and Jonathan Sutter, et al., eds., "Exile," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), Electronic edition.

⁶ Stephen Stringer, *Storying Training 4 Trainers* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 70.

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Story Guide 17

Birth of the Savior

Matthew 1:19-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:21-40

Hundreds of years passed after the time of Jeremiah. The words of the spokesmen came true. God sent the Savior he promised. This is his story.

God sent an angel to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. The angel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! God is with you! Rejoice!"

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over God's people forever. His Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The power of the Most High God will cause this to happen. So the baby to be born will be set apart, and he will be called the Son of God. Nothing is impossible with God." Mary responded, "I am God's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace Mary publicly, because she was pregnant outside of marriage. He decided to break the engagement quietly. But God sent an angel in a dream to Joseph as he slept. "Joseph, descendant of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. Her child was conceived by God's Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from the punishment for their disobedience." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded and took Mary as his wife, but he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born.

A few months later, just as the angel said, Mary gave birth to a son in Bethlehem. Eight days after his birth he was named Jesus, the name

given him by the angel of God. Several weeks after that Mary and Joseph took him to Jerusalem to present him to God in their house of worship. When they got there, they met an old man who had God's Spirit. He had been waiting for the Promised Savior to come and save his people. When the old man saw Jesus, he took the child in his arms and praised God! He said to God,

"I have seen your Savior, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations."

Joseph and Mary were amazed at what was being said about Jesus. Then the old man blessed them, and he said to Mary, "This child will be rejected by many, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others." They returned home, and there Jesus grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God was pleased with him.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Despite the interesting and perhaps shocking details in this story (God finally sends his Savior, but he is the son of God and born of a virgin!), this story remains God-centered. A virgin conceives through God's power, which makes possible a son who is both fully human and fully divine. God's hand and his power to work in history are the things emphasized rather than the surprising means by which he brings his Savior into the world. Even Mary and Joseph recognized this. They are good examples of law-abiding Israelites. Their obedience to the law is not based on legalism. It is the recognition that God's laws and purposes are intertwined.

It was also God's purpose to choose a humble, poor family to give birth to and raise the Savior (Lev 12:8; Luke 2:6, 7, 22). Joseph passed on the humble craftsman trade of carpentry to Jesus (Mark 6:3). Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah in his public declaration of ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18 ESV). The poor were a primary mission. Their dignity and spiritual condition were a priority.

Today's prosperity pundits twist Christ's priority away from a gospel-centered proclamation of redemption to a man-centered agenda that promises health and wealth in this life. The modest birth of the Savior is quickly paired with the verse from 2 Cor 8:9.

Below is the first of "Five Truths About Bible Prosperity" from Kenneth Copeland Ministries.

Financial Prosperity is God's will for you. "You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich" (2 Cor 8:9). What that prosperity looks like will differ from family to family, but be assured that God's will is prosperity. You

are not outside the will of God when you ask for financial provision and blessings.¹

The issue with Copeland's statement and others in the prosperity movement is that it does not reflect the context of the verse. The apostle Paul complimented the Corinthians on their spiritual graces in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in love before challenging them to excel in the gracious act of giving also (2 Cor 8:7).

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Disobedience – God promised Adam and Eve that their descendant would smash the head of the enemy, and now he has been born.

God Chose Abraham – God promised Abraham that through him all the peoples of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus fulfilled this promise.

Suffering Savior – Isaiah promised a Savior would come to bear our punishment for our sin and disobedience. This Savior has been born!

God's Chosen King – The Savior, Jesus, is the descendant of King David who fulfilled God's promise to David that his ancestor would be on the throne forever.

Jeremiah – Despite the punishment of exile for breaking the covenant and worshiping false idols, God promised through Jeremiah that a Savior would come and bring hope to the people. That Savior has been born.

Suffering of Jesus – The Savior, Jesus, was convicted in an unjust trial and bore the punishment for our sin.

Resurrection – The Savior, Jesus, then returned to life and sealed our life eternally with God.

¹ Kenneth Copeland Ministries, "5 Truths about Biblical Prosperity," *KCM Blog*, February 6, 2017, <https://blog.kcm.org/5-truths-biblical-prosperity>.

Copeland's ministry uses this verse too literally. The educated Paul is using a literary tool of figurative language to contrast Jesus's spiritual-physical exchange from heaven to earth. Jesus did not give up monetary wealth or currency. The riches that Jesus gave up were the spiritual riches of glory and power. Because Jesus gave up those spiritual riches, the Corinthians and all of us can be spiritually blessed on earth and rewarded in heaven. In verse 9b, "rich" does not refer to money, wealth, or property on earth.²

Taking Scripture out of context or making it more literal than the author's intent is the mainstay hermeneutic of the prosperity movement. Sprinkled with motivational thoughts that lull

the audience, man-centered thinking becomes their gospel. In 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul, however, wanted to encourage the Corinthians to excel in generous giving, not receiving. He pointed out the churches in Macedonia who were financially poor modeled this (2 Cor 8:1, 2, 7). They understood Jesus gave sacrificially and generously. The Macedonian churches would not be poor if verse 9 meant financial wealth.

We celebrate the birth of the Savior Jesus who was born as a man to a poor family but rich in their devotion and obedience to God. The spiritual riches of Christ far outweigh material wealth.³

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

This story includes the angel's appearance to both Mary and Joseph.

The description of Mary as a virgin is a reference to Isa 7:14. It is important for your audience to understand that Mary is a virgin, but you should use the appropriate vocabulary for your audience. Some languages have figures of speech to indicate virginity.

The greeting word used by the angel to Mary in Matt 1:28 can also mean "Rejoice!" You should use an appropriate, happy greeting for your culture. Some Bible translations have used "Peace be with you."

"Favored woman" is a phrase not often used in modern-day English. This phrase means that God has been kind to Mary or is pleased with

her, so you may simply say that as we have shown in the example story.

Mary's question to the angel in Luke 1:34 gives no hint of disbelief. The angel confirms this by not rebuking her as he did Zechariah (Luke 1:18-20).

Luke 1:35 says that God's Spirit will come upon Mary. This in no way indicates sexual activity, so be sure that the way you say it does not imply that at all. In fact, scholars agree that Matt 1:18's wording is best described as God's power causing the pregnancy to occur, rather than God's Spirit playing the part of a male in conception. We have stated that explicitly in this story to make it clear to our audience.

Joseph was Mary's fiancé. The betrothal was a legally binding contract. If the local language and culture have a term for a more binding form of engagement, it should be used here.

² Steve Christensen, *Translator's Notes on 2 Corinthians* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2016), 2 Cor 8:9.

³ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary v. 29 (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 377.

Matthew 1:19 says that Joseph was good. In the strictest sense of the original word, it meant that he kept the law carefully.

We have included contextual gap information about the seriousness of engagements in those days for our audience to fully understand Joseph's dilemma. Mary was pregnant and not married. Breaking the engagement quietly means that Joseph would not want to subject Mary to a public trial.

Matthew 1:20 says that an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph. We have changed "Lord" to "God" for clearer communication.

We have changed son of David to "descendant of David." Son in this context refers to descendant.

Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus will save his people from their sins, which at first glance can be understood as God's chosen people, the Israelites. However, throughout the story of Jesus we see that "Abraham's descendants" comes to refer to a wider group than the ethnic Jews. Matthew even begins his Gospel with a genealogy that pointedly includes non-Jewish women. It is likely that Matthew's audience at first understood his people to include only Israelites, but as the story continued, realized that God's people had expanded to include others.

The Hebrew name for Jesus, *Yehôšua'*, means "Yahweh is salvation." Yet Matthew indicates that Jesus himself will be the agent of salvation, a subtle reference to the divinity of Jesus. Matthew puts the meaning in future form—he will save—perhaps a reference to the related form of the verb to save, *yôšîa'*.

The concept of being saved from their sins does not mean that people will no longer sin. More accurately, it refers to being redeemed, rescued, or set free from the effects of their sin. You may state that explicitly in your story as we have done.

If you include Matt 1:22–23 in your story, you should realize that it is not part of the angelic speech but an aside included by the Gospel writer. The message in 1:23 is given by a prophet—an earthly messenger—rather than a heavenly angelic messenger. Be sure that your audience understands this from the story.

We have omitted most of the Luke 2 account of Jesus's birth and have instead included the information about Jesus's dedication at the temple to include the words that Simeon said about Jesus.

The text of the scene of baby Jesus at the temple focuses on his presentation to God rather than on the cultural norms of the day.

We have omitted the names of Nazareth, Gabriel, and Simeon to keep the story simple and memorable. However, we have included the name of Bethlehem because it is likely that your audience has either heard the name or will have heard it in a previous story.

We have greatly simplified Simeon's speech and have omitted Anna to keep the story simple and memorable. However, the structure and content of Simeon's speech reflects both Zechariah's and Mary's hymns earlier in Luke. Luke's narratives demonstrate a promise-fulfillment cycle.

Simeon had God's Spirit "on him," a fact that may cause certain audiences to trust his testimony even more. Depending on your audience, you may want to include this fact in your story.

Simeon says that he has seen God's salvation or God's instrument of salvation. He clearly identifies this instrument with Jesus himself. In this story we have clarified that by saying that Simeon has seen God's Savior. From the context of the term salvation in Luke's Gospel, we know that Simeon understood this salvation to not be political but spiritual.

Luke 2:33–34 serves as a marker for the first hint of the controversy and conflict that will surround Jesus’s ministry. It acts as a bridge from Jesus’s birth into his ministry, anticipating the conflict to come.

We have omitted Luke 2:35 because it may distract from the main point of this story, which is Simeon’s statement of Jesus’s purpose and mission. Scholars are unclear as to what it means that a sword will pierce Mary—either that she will experience doubt about Jesus’s ministry, or that she will suffer through sadness in Jesus’s life.

Background Information

Historical

Greek and Roman accounts of their gods would include descriptions of gods having sexual relations with earthly creatures. Any hints of these kinds of descriptions are completely absent from this biblical account. The Holy Spirit is not male or female, so his actions are creative rather than sexual.

Biblical

Engagement—a binding agreement of future marriage—in biblical Jewish culture, was as binding as marriage itself. It required witnesses and could only be broken by death (which left the woman a widow) or divorce (allowed in cases of infidelity). After a year’s engagement, the couple would have a public ceremony in which the woman would leave her father’s house, and they would live together. The marriage would not be consummated until then. The woman would typically be 13 or 14 years old.

Because Joseph was a man who carefully kept the law, he would have had no choice but to divorce Mary when he heard the news of her pregnancy. Before Roman times, adultery would have resulted in the death sentence, but by this time the Romans had abolished all such death sentences, and the normal course of action in these situations was divorce. However, Joseph would normally have been expected

to subject Mary to a public, humiliating trial. Therefore, some scholars believe that the best translation of Matt 1:19 is “Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man, yet he did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.” Joseph chose an equally legal, but more compassionate, way to deal with things. He wanted the divorce to be quiet, which would have consisted of a written document and the presence of only two witnesses. However, keep in mind that the nature of the small communities of that time would have made Mary’s situation and pregnancy almost impossible to hide.

Joseph and Mary consistently demonstrated that they were law-abiding. They had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day. They named him Jesus as the angel had commanded. They offered the proper purification rituals in the temple. These actions are normal cultural activities and highlight Mary and Joseph’s piety.

Women were impure after childbirth for one week (and cleansed through a ritual bath), and then were at a secondary level of impurity for an additional thirty-three days. There was a requirement then to present an offering at the temple. If she were poor, the offering could consist of two turtledoves or two pigeons. Therefore, Mary and Joseph would have brought Jesus to the temple forty days after his birth.

Although both Simeon and Anna talk about Israel’s redemption, Simeon brings up a surprising fact—the fact that Jesus will be the source of salvation for those outside of Israel as well. The fact that this revelation takes place at the focal point of the Jewish faith serves as an affirmation that it is true—and thus the irony that God’s proclamation of salvation for all comes from the physical center of Jewish faith. The discourse features (patterned repetition) of Simeon’s hymn and Isaiah 49:6 seem to confirm that the nations do refer to Gentiles, and that God’s salvation is universal in reach.

Simeon and Anna represent the male and female counterparts of a faithful Israel who is expecting God’s redemption.

Jesus “filled with wisdom” has to do with “insight in the will and rule of God.”⁴ This wisdom is something given by God rather than an achievement.

Characters

Mary

Joseph

Simeon/old man

Holy Spirit

Key Terms

God’s Spirit

God’s Spirit (or the Spirit of God) coming into (or onto) someone refers to God’s giving an individual certain abilities or gifts. With kings, God’s Spirit came at the time of anointing and usually endowed the king with special wisdom and power from God. For other individuals, the coming of God’s Spirit usually indicates that the person has been divinely equipped to do something. The concept of holy refers to people or things that belong to God, are consecrated to him, or are like him. Often, however, Scripture translations use God’s Spirit because many languages do not have a word for holy that adequately expresses the concept.

Angel

You should use the term for “angel” used in an existing Bible translation if there is one, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you do not have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original. An angel is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form. They are inferior to Jesus. They often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for angel that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as “messenger of/from God, envoy of God,” or perhaps an “ambassa-

dor of God.” Be aware, though, that “prophet” also conveys those meanings. You may need to include “spirit (messenger from God)” in this description.

Disobedience/sin

Sin refers to an act of disobedience to God. Be sure that the word you use here does not mean that someone has failed to perform a religious act (i.e., alms, ritual prayer, following religious dietary rules, etc.). If necessary, you can use “disobedience.”

Holy/pure

The word holy or holiness refers to a separation from what is unclean and a consecration to what is pure or clean. When holy refers to God himself, it signifies that he is distinct from his creation, and that he is morally perfect. It refers to his majesty and power.

Luke 1:35 calls Jesus “holy,” which means to be set apart, or anointed by God for a specific task (i.e., that of saving the world from the effects of their sin). He is holy not because his conception lacked sexual intercourse, but because God’s Spirit (i.e., power) is involved in his anointing. If your audience does not understand the full definition of the word holy, you may choose to include a description in your story. We have chosen to say that Jesus will be set apart.

Place of worship/temple

The temple was the unique Jewish place of worship. If the word for “temple” in your language only refers to a specific religion’s place of worship, you may choose to change the word to something more general, like “place of worship.” Even the word temple in English has such religious connotations that few people truly understand what it means.

Promised Savior

Savior, as used in the New Testament, means “one who saves from spiritual and eternal danger.” Often, the wholeness of man includes

⁴ Jannes Reiling and Jan Lodewyk Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 144.

both physical and spiritual aspects which are difficult to distinguish, but the actual term Savior in the New Testament is used only for Jesus as a spiritual deliverer. “Promised Savior” is also the phrase we’ve chosen to use for the English version of the stories as the term to describe who Jesus is—the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised Savior. We have chosen, for the audience’s first exposure to the gospel, to use a consistent term for Jesus’s role in God’s redemptive plan throughout the story set. You should use a term that is consistent with your theme (such as Promised King, Anointed One, etc.). The terms Christ and Messiah have the same meaning, namely, “the person who is anointed (i.e., appointed) by God for a special purpose.” Anointing with oil was the symbol of being appointed and set apart by God for a position of authority and responsibility, especially for kingship, or as a high priest. Many aspects of Jesus’s roles and character are implied in the term Anointed One, including his kingship over all the nations, his role as God’s representative, his role as the means of bringing about God’s victory over his enemies, and finally, as the one appointed to accomplish redemption for God’s people. Translation resources suggest that as we search for a way to translate the Messiah or Christ, we should search for a term that includes the concepts of one who is specially appointed by God, and one who is Savior or king. Some languages do not have an appropriate personal noun that expresses the idea of Savior, and it needs to be translated as “the one who saves,” or “the saving person.”

Blessed

“Blessed” refers to when God helps, does good to, or favors someone or something. The specific blessing can include God’s giving them the ability to reproduce and multiply (as in the Abraham and Creation stories). Try to avoid using a word related to luck or games of chance.

Notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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Story Guide 18

The Temptation of Jesus

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus grew up healthy, strong, and full of wisdom. When he began his ministry, God's Spirit led him out to the wilderness to fast and pray. There God allowed the enemy, Satan, to tempt Jesus to disobey God. Jesus had not eaten food for forty days and nights. He was hungry.

Satan said to Jesus, "If you are really the Son of God, prove it by commanding these stones to become loaves of bread for food."

But Jesus said, "The Scriptures say, 'People do not live on bread or food alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest part of the rebuilt House of Worship. He said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! The Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you.'"

But Jesus refused and said, "The Scriptures say, 'Don't test, don't try to force God to prove himself.'"

After that, Satan took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and showed him all the nations of the world and all their riches and greatness. Satan said, "I will give you all that you can see, if you will kneel down and worship me."

Jesus said, "Get away from me, Satan. The Scriptures say, 'People must worship the Lord their God and serve only him.'"

Immediately, Satan left. Angels came and took care of Jesus.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

As Jesus began his public ministry, God led him into a season of fasting and prayer before his return home to Galilee to prepare for his ministry. God allowed Satan to come alongside Jesus to tempt him. Satan tempted Jesus to meet his physical hunger. He tempted Jesus with pride, to misuse his position as God's son to test God. Satan tested Jesus with the lure of power, to circumvent the path of redemption at the cross and seize control as an earthly king.

Jesus responded with Scripture from Deuteronomy 6-8 that addressed similar situations when Moses was leading the Israelites through the wilderness back to the land God had promised Abraham. Keener explains about the first-century audience: "Many Jewish people were also hoping for a new exodus led by a new Moses—complete with new manna, or bread from heaven. The devil wants to conform Jesus to contemporary expectations."¹

The contemporary expectations of Jesus's day continue today as many people expect their allegiance to God to bring them wealth, success, and perfect health. Prosperity prophets spend little time calling for repentance of sin. Instead, they instruct people how to speak their truth as if God must prove himself, like in the temptation account. Joel Osteen writes in his book *Your Best Life Now*, "If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you're going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family."²

Satan continues to attempt to seduce people with self-focus. He tempted Jesus to exchange worship for earthly comfort, pleasure, and success. Jesus chose a life of obedience.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Disobedience – Satan began his mission of luring people with self-focused lies in the garden. It is mirrored in the Temptation of Jesus story. Apparently, from ancient times until now, people have found the possibility of being like God and ruling over all the kingdoms of the world very enticing.

Moses Intercedes for God's Presence – The wilderness wanderings of the Israelites and their struggles were remembered and highlighted by Jesus.

Birth of Jesus – Jesus was born as the Son of God. Satan questioned this by daring Jesus to prove it.

Suffering of Jesus – The temptation proposed a way to circumvent God's plan for the redemption of man at the cross.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

² Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: FaithWords, 2004), 132.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The story begins where the **Birth of Jesus** story concluded. Jesus was a mature man and was preparing for his ministry. We continue to use consistent terms from previous stories such as “God’s Spirit.” We use the word “wilderness” as a generic term. This would have been a dry, arid region. “Bush” may be appropriate for some contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, but not all. Alternatives include “empty land,” or “an area where no one lives.”³

We have opted to use “fast and pray” in this story, considering the intended audience. Other audiences may not be familiar with the Christian discipline of fasting. To fast is to voluntarily go without food to concentrate on religious activities such as prayer. Neither the Gospel of Matthew nor the Gospel of Luke say whether Jesus drank water. Words or phrases that suggest he did not drink water should be avoided. Likewise, the length of this fast of forty days does not mean he only fasted during the day. We made this explicit by saying forty days and nights. Some audiences may misunderstand forty days and forty nights to mean eighty total days. The story crafter should avoid any phrase that suggests this.

Matthew uses the term “devil” or “tempter” throughout chapter 4. Jesus calls him “Satan” (v10). “Devil” in Greek means “accuser.” In Hebrew, “satan” means “accuser, enemy.” We have chosen to refer to him as Satan for consistency with previous stories. Devil/Satan are interchangeable throughout the New Testament.⁴

To tempt means to be “put to the test” to sin or disobey God. Satan was only allowed to tempt Jesus as far as God allowed. The audience should not be led to think that Satan and God

are on an equal level.

Bread was a main food source for the people of Jesus’s day. If bread is not commonly known, then a storyteller can just say “food” for bread. Jesus quotes Deut 8:3 that man cannot live by bread alone. “Man” is not gender specific but speaks about mankind in general. Thus, the example story says “people.”

Many translations, such as the ESV and NASB state, “the devil took Jesus to the holy city.” Many audiences may not understand that this is Jerusalem or perhaps think it is a reference to Mecca. We have made it explicit in the story. Future stories in this set will feature Jerusalem. This phrasing is consistent with the wording that was first introduced in **The Warning from Solomon**. That story introduces both Jerusalem and the first temple, termed “House of Worship to God.” It was the central place of worship for the Jewish people until its destruction during the time of Jeremiah and the Babylonian exile. This story mentions the “rebuilt” House of Worship.

Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the temple. The ESV, NASB, and NKJV translate it as “pinnacle.” The area in question is thought to have looked over into the plunging Kidron valley. A fall from this high place would be deadly. We have opted to use the more generic wording to aid audience comprehension. Pinnacle may also be misunderstood as the top of a church spire for modern audiences. The word choice for “pinnacle” should reflect a place where people stand. In this context it was a place where people stood and overlooked the surrounding area.⁵

The example story consistently uses the same phrase to reference the Hebrew Scriptures, “the Scriptures say.”

³ Randy Groff, ed., *Translator’s Notes on Matthew: Notes*, Translator’s Notes (Dallas: SIL International, 2016), Mt 4:1.

⁴ Richard Thomas France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 130.

⁵ Randy Groff, ed. *Translator’s Notes on Matthew* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2016), Matt 4:5.

Jesus's response of not "tempting" God is unpacked in the example story as "don't test," then further explained concretely to an oral preference audience as "don't force God to prove himself."⁶

Satan then took Jesus to a high mountain to look at the nations of the world. This is to help the modern audience understand that it is broader than kingdoms ruled by kings. "All their glory" is a Hebrew idiom that means their greatness. The term "kneel down" here is a form of submission. This can look differently across people groups where some literally lie prostrate, kneel, or sit at someone's feet. This is often translated as "fall down" but not in a sense to stumble and fall. A storyteller should use the best word picture for their audience.

Jesus gave Satan a sharp command to be left alone. We opted not to use "Be gone" as it brings up the image of today's combat praying where congregants yell their commands at Satan and God. In the local language, it should be a natural expression that means to leave.

"You must worship" is in the plural sense, and a reference to Deut 6:13. This command is for both men and women. Worship and serve are verbs known as a *doublet* and mean the same thing.⁷ Jesus used LORD God, including the personal name Yahweh, to be explicit with Satan.

The conclusion brings this example story to an end. A strong summary or conclusion is a common narrative feature across languages in Africa and around the world. The word "ministered" is unpacked to help the audience have a mental image of the angels serving Jesus, but Matthew does not specifically say

how. The storyteller should not embellish or speculate what that looked like.

Background Information

Biblical

Bread

Bread was a main staple in the diet of the Jewish people. Their bread was made from either wheat or barley flour. It was round. Bread was interchangeable with the word for "food" in Gen 3:19 and Prov 6:8.⁸

Matthew 4/Deuteronomy references

In Matt 4:4 Jesus quotes Deut 8:3: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (ESV). For a whole life, a person needs food but also needs to depend on and obey all that God says.

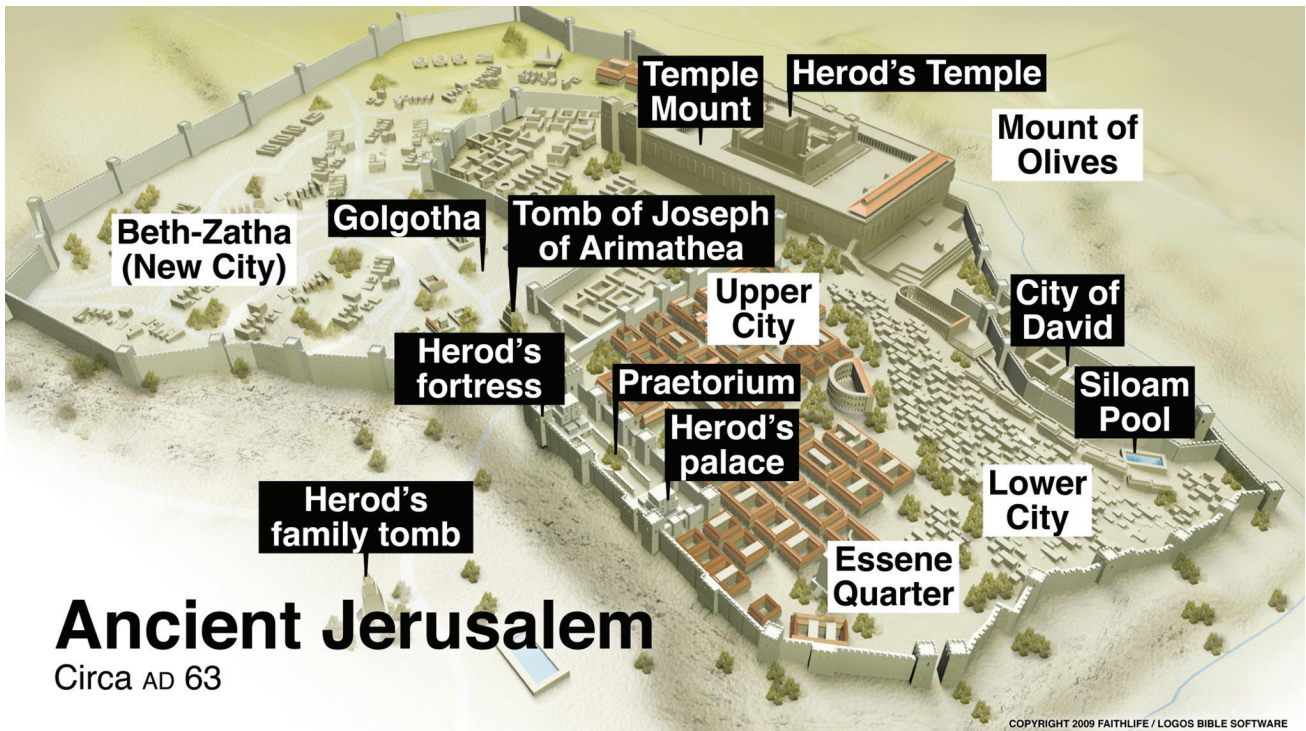
In Matt 4:6 Jesus quotes Ps 91:11, 12: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will you bear up, lest you strike your foot against a stone" (ESV).

In Matt 4:7 Jesus quotes Deut 6:16: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah" (ESV). Massah or the place of testing is from Exod 17:1-7 when the Israelites complained to Moses about the lack of water. This testing revealed dissatisfaction with what God had provided. Contrary to what the prosperity gospel teaches, dissatisfaction with what God has provided is not the beginning of holiness and happiness. It is sin that tests and even provokes God.

⁶ Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 84.

⁷ Groff, *Matthew*, Matt 4:9.

⁸ William J. Martin, "Bread," in *New Bible Dictionary*, Derek R. W. Wood, et al., eds., 3rd ed, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 145.



In Matt 4:10b Jesus quotes Deut 6:13: "It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear" (ESV).

"Forty days" is used in the Bible as an idiomatic expression for a significant but limited period (e.g., Gen 7:4; Num 13:25; 1 Sam 17:16; Jonah 3:4; Acts 1:3), but Matthew speaks more specifically of "forty days and forty nights," and, in view of his interest elsewhere in Moses and Elijah, it is possible that he intends that phrase to recall more specifically either the period spent without food by Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:18; 34:28; Deut 9:9, etc.) or by Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:8).⁹

Characters

God

House of Worship/Temple

Satan

Angels

Jesus

Key Terms

Angels

If you have a Bible translation, your best option would be to use the word in the translation, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you don't have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original. An "angel" is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form, they are inferior to Jesus, and they often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for "angel" that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as "messenger of/from God," "envoy of God," or perhaps "ambassador of God." Be aware, though, that "prophet" also conveys those meanings. You might have to add "spirit (messenger from God)" to this description.

God's Spirit

God's Spirit (or the Spirit of God, Holy Spirit) coming into (or onto) someone refers to God's giving an individual certain abilities or gifts.

⁹ France, *Matthew*, 129-130.

With kings, God's Spirit came at the time of anointing and usually endowed the king with special wisdom and power from God. For other individuals, the coming of God's Spirit usually indicates that the person has been divinely equipped to do something. The concept of holy refers to people or things that belong to God, are consecrated to him, or are like him. Often, however, Scripture translations use God's Spirit because many languages do not have a word for holy that adequately expresses the concept.

House of Worship of God/Temple

In this story it would have been the second temple. The return of the exiles from Babylon (535 BC) is detailed in Ezra 2. They began to rebuild the Temple that Solomon built. King Herod restored and expanded this temple about 19 BC.

Satan

The proper noun Satan is the name of the leader of the evil spirits who rebelled against God. He is a created being and is limited in power. He is not an equal to any person of the Trinity.

Son of God: The phrase the Son of God is a title for Jesus. This title indicates that Jesus has the same nature and character as God. It also indicates that the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, his Son, is similar in some way to the relationship between human fathers and sons. God the Father does not have a physical body. He did not have a sexual relationship that resulted in Mary becoming pregnant and giving birth to Jesus.¹⁰

¹⁰ Groff, *Matthew*, Matt 4:3.

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Story Guide 19

Seek the Kingdom of God

Matthew 4:23-5:2; 6:19-33

After Jesus left the bush where Satan tempted him, he began his work of teaching people and declaring the good news about the kingdom, that God's reign on earth had come. Jesus also healed sick people and even drove demons out of people. Crowds of people came from all over the region to listen and to bring their sick people for him to heal. One day, Jesus went up on a quiet hillside and sat down to teach his closest followers. The crowd followed. Jesus taught many things that day. He even taught about money.

This is what Jesus said about money and possessions. "Do not store up for yourselves riches and wealth here in this world. Insects eat it, or rust can spoil it. Thieves break in and steal it. Instead, store up spiritual riches in heaven. In heaven, the insects and rust cannot ruin it. Thieves cannot steal it from you. Where your riches are, your heart, your thoughts and actions will be focused there too." Jesus warned, "No slave can serve two masters. You cannot be totally committed to God and be totally committed to making money."

Jesus then told the crowd something opposite of how the world thinks. He said, "Do not worry or stress about things in life, like food and clothes. There is much more to life than just food and clothing! Look at the birds. They do not farm or even store up their food, but your Father God in heaven feeds them. You are much more valuable to him than birds. Can worry and stress add a single minute to your life?"

Jesus then said, "There is no need to worry that you may not have enough nice clothes to wear. Look at the wildflowers in the fields. They do not make their own clothes. Even King Solomon, who was so rich, did not have clothes as beautiful as any of these flowers! So, as our Father God provides for the flowers, he will provide for you! You have such little faith!"

Jesus finished speaking about money and said, "Do not worry and stress about food and clothes like non-believers. Your Father God in heaven knows your needs. First, seek God's Kingdom—submit to his rule and leading in your life, do what is right in God's eyes, and then he will provide you with those other things.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus began his ministry in the Galilee region. He demonstrated supernatural power by healing the sick, calming storms, and casting demons out of possessed people.

His teaching on the kingdom of God was unlike anything that people had heard. In this new kingdom Jesus spoke about on the mountain, he said the true followers were like salt. Just as salt improves taste and is a preservative, followers are to improve the world and the people around them.¹

He did not come to abolish but to fulfill the law. Anger, lust, divorce, oaths, and retaliation were not part of his kingdom. He spoke of loving your enemies and giving to the needy quietly and about humility above public demonstration of religious duty (Matt 5-8). His is an upside-down kingdom where servants are the greatest, and the last will be first (Matt 19, 20). Jesus challenged his followers to put their energy, trust, and focus on their heavenly Father rather than on their worldly possessions. His followers were to trust that God saw their needs, and he would provide for those needs. It is only by God's grace that we can be part of this kingdom.

The kingdom of God can be described as "already but not yet." Prosperity and word of faith advocates preach that the kingdom has fully come now with all the benefits.² No more suffering but instead perfect health and wealth now. This is not the kingdom that Jesus taught.

The words of Jesus in **Seek the Kingdom of God** should be a reminder of the upside-down kingdom he affirms today as well. How do the claims of today's prosperity proponents and word of faith speakers compare to Jesus's own words? An article published by Christianity Today and the Lausanne Movement warns us that

prosperity proponents are portraying Jesus as quite the opposite of his words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

Preachers like Duncan-Williams (Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, the Prayer Cathedral, Accra, Ghana) have argued that as the robe of Jesus was seamless and the soldiers gambled for it, "Jesus must have worn designer robes." Even the donkey on which Jesus rode to Jerusalem has been re-invented in sermons as the Cadillac or Mercedes-Benz of the times. This is simply the sacralization of human greed and covetousness.³

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the World – God created the world and people in his image to live in relationship and community. This is later expressed in the kingdom of God as he lives and rules among his people.

Moses Chose True Prosperity – Moses chose to seek God's kingdom first and foremost by leaving a life of luxury and then returning to Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery.

The Warning from Solomon – Solomon began his life by seeking God first. God rewarded him. Jesus later mentioned him in this narrative proverbially and compared him to the lilies in the field.

Parable of the Rich Fool – Jesus again was teaching a crowd and used this parable to warn against worldly riches rather than treasure in heaven.

The Cost of Following – Jesus shared with would-be followers what it will cost for disciples to follow him and seek the kingdom.

¹ Randy Groff, ed., *Translator's Notes on Matthew* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2016), 5:13.

² Dieudonné Tofu, "The Gods of the Prosperity Gospel: Unmasking American Idols in Africa," *Desiring God*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-gods-of-the-prosperity-gospel#fn7>.

³ Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Did Jesus Wear Designer Robes?" *Lausanne Movement*, November 1, 2009, <https://lausanne.org/content/did-jesus-wear-designer-robos>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

Jesus's teaching on money in Matthew is embedded within the iconic Sermon on the Mount. Because Jesus sat and taught his disciples and the crowds, the discourse is dense and limited in drama and character interaction.

In the example story introduction, the specific place names such as Galilee, Syria, and east of the Jordan are not included. Storytellers can include the names if the audience is familiar with the region. Proper nouns of unknown geographical areas can be difficult for the audience to process and reproduce accurately.

In this story set, we are opting to use the words "the closest followers" in reference to Jesus's twelve disciples. "The closest followers" suggests they have a student or apprentice relationship with Jesus. They live life in a community with the desire to adopt the philosophy and teaching of their teacher/master. The word disciple is generally used in a church setting where people may or may not know the correct definition. Note that in Matt 7:28-29, the crowds were there listening to the teaching along with the disciples.

While this story is usually known as the "Sermon on the Mount," the Greek word can refer to a hill or mountain. Jesus taught on the sloping hillside above the lake of Galilee. This is modern day Lake Kinneret. The elevation above the lake is as high as 500 meters, a walkable height for a crowd of people. Either "hill" or "mountain" may be used.

Matthew's use of the term "good news" in Matt 4:23 is different from how the Gospels of Mark and Luke use it. "The gospel of the kingdom" is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. "In a Christian context the good news is always the good news of what God has done for sinful

people in sending his Son to be their Savior. Here it is the gospel of the kingdom, which, as Jesus has said, has drawn near."⁴ Matthew emphasizes that God's reign, his kingdom, has now come in Jesus.

Note the mnemonic device of beginning the second paragraph with how the first paragraph ended. The word "treasure" or "riches" refers to expensive things, wealth, possessions, or tangible assets. The word for these earthly items is repeated in the context of heaven.

We use the word "insects," a generic word for "moth." Some audiences may be unfamiliar with this specific insect. In some languages it may be the same word. Rust can destroy, ruin or spoil in this context. Any of these verbs are acceptable for the storyteller to use. In first-century Palestine, thieves would break through the rock/mud walls of homes to rob their victims. This happens today as well across Africa and around the world.

Jesus explained that where the treasure or riches are, there the heart is. "The heart" is a term that expresses inner life. Some cultures may use a different term to express the seat of emotions like the insides, brain, or liver. Note we have made the implicit spiritual riches in heaven explicit. Some worldviews believe they are literally storing up physical wealth for the afterlife. This can be a barrier for conversion. Often their understanding is that their riches are stored up in that paradise. If one converts, so their thinking goes, then all those stored up riches are lost, and one has to make do with fewer riches in the new paradise.

Although Matt 6:22-23 is a complex metaphor understood by the original audience, it would require a lengthy explanation for the modern audience. It is not included in the example story.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 88.

In the example story, we included the familiar proverbial expression of a slave serving two masters. Storytellers should not say “work for two employers” as some people have two or three jobs to support their families. The sense is total commitment, which is the parenthetical statement we use in the follow-up verse to help unpack this expression. We did not use the phrase “you cannot serve God or serve money.” This teaching is not just for pastors or missionaries called and employed by a local church to serve God. It is a general call to all believers.

The example story uses the voice of the narrator to prepare the audience that Jesus is about to share something countercultural. Jesus uses a command to stop anxiety, stress, or worry—all are interchangeable words in this context. We have turned the rhetorical question that is found in the ESV, NASB, and NLT translations into a statement to be more explicit for the audience.

Jesus illustrates his point by referring to birds. We generalized their work as “farming” to draw attention to the absurdity of birds working hard. In this instance, we keep the thought-provoking rhetorical question, *Will worry or stress add time to a life?* It demands a response.

We included the illustration of King Solomon in this story as it connects nicely to the story **The Warning from Solomon** in this story set. Lilies may not be known across Africa or around the world. We are using wildflowers. The sense of God’s provision for our clothes is that of essential needs and not extravagant wants.

The Greek word that the ESV translates as “therefore” introduces a conclusion. The Sermon on the Mount continued, but Jesus finished this teaching section on money. Jesus again addresses choosing faith over the stress of worrying about basic needs.

Although the non-believers in the first century would have been called pagans or Gentiles, we have used “non-believers” for today’s audience.

The narrative is summarized in Matt 6:33 and is heavy in meaning. We made explicit the key biblical terms, *kingdom of God*, and *his righteousness* in this story. See definitions in the Key Term section. *Seek the Kingdom of God* is a Greek idiom. It does not mean the kingdom is lost. It means one should earnestly strive to obey God in this context.

Background Information

Historical

Sitting was the normal posture for teaching in the Jewish culture. A teacher sat while teaching in synagogues as well as in schools.

Provision

Most people in antiquity had little beyond basic necessities—food, clothing, and shelter. Because their acquisition of these necessities often depended—especially in rural areas—on seasonal rains or (in Egypt) the flooding of the Nile, they had plenty of cause for stress even about food and clothing.⁵

Biblical

Wildflowers

Scholars think that the flowers in Matt 6:29 may have been anemones. They are purple in color, which would have brought to mind the color of royalty hence the reference to King Solomon’s clothes.

Characters

Jesus

Crowd

Closest followers/disciples

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

Key Terms

Disciple

A disciple was someone who learned from another to adopt their thinking or lifestyle. In the NT they lived in community, traveling together for the purpose of hands-on learning experience, hence followers. "Students" or "apprentices" is sometimes used in dynamic translations.

Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. The kingdom has come because Jesus is present and establishing it. The kingdom of God also means the kingdom that will come when Christ returns to rule. It is also expressed as the people or the redeemed in God's kingdom.⁶

Righteousness

In the Old Testament, righteousness is the act of doing what God requires, doing and living the way God wants. The Old Testament idea of righteousness is based on the relationship between God and man or between man and man. Righteousness refers to holiness. Here in Matt 6, it is doing what God requires, what he wants, what pleases him.⁷ The concept of righteousness in Hebrew is thought to come from an Arabic root meaning "straightness."⁸

⁶ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 568.

⁷ Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*. UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), Matt 6:33.

⁸ Bruce A. Milne, "Righteousness," in *New Bible Dictionary*, Derek R. W. Wood, et al., eds., 3rd ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1020.

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Story Guide 20

The Cost of Following

Luke 9:21-27, 57-62

Jesus continued to teach about the kingdom of God, that the time of God to rule as King had come! Many people were interested in all the miraculous things Jesus was doing. He healed the sick, cast out demons from people, and he fed multitudes of people. Jesus even sent out his closest followers to share the good news and to heal people. But Jesus began to share with his followers that God's kingdom is not what they thought it was going to be.

He said to his closest followers, "I am going to suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, and be killed. Three days after I die, God will cause me to live again."

Jesus continued to teach about and proclaim God's kingdom. He also had some difficult things to say to his potential followers.

Jesus said to the crowd, "If anyone wants to come and be my follower, you will need to forget about yourself, pick up your cross – be ready to suffer and die to follow me. What good is it if you own the whole world, but lose yourself?" There is a cost to be a follower.

Some days later, Jesus decided it was time to go to Jerusalem to face his suffering. As they were walking toward Jerusalem, a man said to Jesus, "I will be your follower and go everywhere with you." Jesus said to him, "Wild animals have holes to sleep in, even birds have nests, but I do not have a regular place to sleep."

Jesus said to another man, "Come follow me." But the man said, "Sir, I will come after my father dies and I can bury him." But Jesus told him, "Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! You must go and tell about the kingdom of God."

Another man said, "I will follow you, sir, but first let me go and say goodbye to my family." Jesus said, "Anyone who looks backward while he is plowing a field, is a person who wants to return to his former way of life. He cannot do useful work in God's kingdom."

Jesus and his followers continued their journey to Jerusalem all the while teaching and sharing that the time of God to rule as King had come.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus's ministry in the Galilee region had ended. He and his disciples began their journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and ultimately to the cross. Many in the crowd wanted to be a follower of this exciting new teacher. Then Jesus shared bluntly the cost of being a true follower. Jesus warned in Luke 9:25, "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (ESV)

Jesus never taught that it was wrong to be wealthy or to own things. When possessions become the focus or are more important than God, that is a pathway to sin. The temptation of money remains a stumbling block for many. Despite the warning, prosperity preachers continue to make headlines suggesting their lifestyles do not conform to the totality of Jesus's teaching. In 1989, US federal authorities arrested and convicted infamous prosperity advocate Jim Bakker of the Praise the Lord (PTL) Club. Charges included mail and wire fraud and conspiracy to defraud the public in the United States. He served nearly five years in the United States federal prison system. Bakker was also named in sexual assault allegations.¹

More recently, a Nigerian prosperity pastor, Tim Oluseun Omotoso, founder of Jesus Dominion International, has been detained in a South African prison. He is facing a trial on sixty-three charges of rape, human trafficking, and racketeering. He is the author of *How to Enjoy Health, Wealth, and Longevity*.²

One of the richest pastors in Africa, Prophet Bushiri, founded the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church in Pretoria, South Africa. With more than five million followers on social media,

he has an estimated worth of over \$100 million. He faces charges of theft, fraud, and money laundering in South Africa. He remains active in ministry in his homeland of Malawi.³

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Chose True Prosperity – Moses chose to seek God's kingdom first and foremost. He counted the cost by leaving a life of luxury and then returning to Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery.

Seek the Kingdom – Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount about seeking after obedience and righteousness over worldly possessions.

The Suffering of Jesus – Jesus modeled servant leadership and submission to the extent of suffering, disrespect, torture, and execution for the redemption of man to a holy God.

Sufferings of Paul – Paul willingly abandoned his position as an influential Pharisee to pursue the mission of Jesus declaring the gospel in difficult situations and endured physical persecution, arrest and ultimately death.

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering – Paul warned his protégé to be prepared for the impending persecution and be content in the midst of it.

¹ History.com Editors, "Televangelist Jim Bakker Is Indicted on Federal Charges," *This Day in History*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jim-bakker-is-indicted-on-federal-charges>.

² TSB News editors, "Pastor Timothy Omotoso Biography—Age, Rape allegation, Human Trafficking, Racketeering, Wife's Plea and Jail," *TSB News*, September 23, 2021, <https://tsbnews.com/2021/09/pastor-timothy-omotoso-biography-age-rape-allegation-human-trafficking-racketeering-wifes-plea-jail>.

³ Monica Mark, "Millionaire Preacher Skips Bail in South Africa, Fueling International Dispute," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/world/africa/south-africa-malawi-shepherd-bushiri.html?smid=url-share>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction is a brief summary of Jesus's ministry in the Galilee region and sets the stage for the journey toward Jerusalem. The exciting news of all the good works is balanced with the voice of the narrator alluding to a plot twist that the kingdom is going to be different from what is expected. The example story unpacks the concept, the kingdom of God—that the time of God to rule as King has come in Jesus. "Kingdom of God" is a term used frequently, but the correct definition may not be widely understood.

Jesus revealed his impending death. "Son of Man" was the title Jesus used to refer to himself most often and is an Old Testament reference. Story crafters are encouraged to craft the story from Daniel 7 where the title "Son of Man" appears. Storytellers will sometimes substitute "Son of God," but this is not accurate, and its use is discouraged. In the example story, we used the personal pronoun "I" for easy comprehension for all audiences. This reference to Jesus's suffering is included in this story to show that he warned of his personal suffering and that true followers may also endure suffering. This also supports the plot twist mentioned earlier.

Note the consistent use of key terms from previous stories such as "closest followers" and "God's kingdom."

The phrase "take up your cross and follow me" from Luke 9:23 is a somewhat familiar idiom in reference to the Roman execution method of crucifixion. We have chosen to leave the phrase in the story and unpack the idiom with familiar terminology.

In Luke 9:25, Jesus poses a rhetorical question. The phrase, traditionally translated as "gain the whole world," is a figure of speech. In the original language, *kerdēsai ton kosmon holon* is to acquire the sum total of earthly wealth.⁴ The example story states, "own the whole world."

"Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem" is a literal translation that Luke recorded in Greek but borrowed from the Hebrew language (Luke 9:51). It means he resolved firmly, decided definitely.⁵ A storyteller can use a local idiom to express this sentiment of resolute thinking. We have filled in the contextual gap by saying Jesus was going there to face his suffering. This is in the sense of the divine purpose of Jesus of his arrest, trial, abuse, and death. "Decided to go" may be misconstrued as traveling on a whim to visit.

Luke records three short vignettes of the real cost of following Jesus.

Jesus responded to the potential follower with a proverbial saying. Not all audiences may know the wild animal, the fox. "Hole" is a concrete word choice for a den. Again, Jesus refers to himself as his title of preference, Son of Man. We use the personal pronoun "I" for clarity. Jesus pointed out that he is essentially homeless, and the would-be inner circle followers should count the cost.

In the next vignette, Jesus initiated the conversation by asking a man to come follow him. Note the man addressed Jesus with a polite title, like *sir* or *mister* when he called Jesus "lord." It is not LORD as in the sense, LORD God, Yahweh. The word-for-word reading of the text in Luke 9:59 reads as if the man's father died recently. There is scholarly debate that if the father had died then he would have been

⁴ Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Mark*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 267.

⁵ Jannes Reiling and Jan Lodewyk Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 394.

home in mourning rather than on the road with Jesus. Scholars speculate that the man's obedience could be days or even years in the future.⁶

Jesus responded with what would have been a culturally shocking command. The first use of the word "dead" is in reference to their spiritual condition, the second is the state of physically dead. The spiritually dead are people who reject the message that Jesus brought about the kingdom of God. Jesus insisted the priority was to share about God's kingdom.

The last person in this series of potential followers asked Jesus's permission to go say goodbye to his family. He, too, addressed Jesus as sir/mister/master/chief, not as LORD God. We use the title "sir" to make this point clear. Jesus responded with a farming metaphor. We have worded Jesus's implicit response explicitly by explaining that the metaphor describes a person who wants to return to his former way of life.

Background Information

Biblical

Rose on the third day

First-century Jews considered part of a day to be counted. When Jesus said he would arise "on the third day," the day total is thus counted: Friday, Day 1—the day he was executed and died; Saturday, Day 2—the day he was in the tomb; Sunday, Day 3—the day he rose from the dead.

Let me bury my father.

The burial of the dead was a religious duty that took precedence over all others, including even the study of the Law. Priests, who were not normally allowed to touch dead bodies, could

do so in the case of relatives (Lev 21:1-3). To assist in burying a person who had no claims on one as a relative was a work of love which carried great reward from God both in this life and in the next world. It follows that the burial of a father was a religious duty of the utmost importance (Gen 50:5). To leave it undone was something scandalous for a Jew.⁷

Son of Man

Son of Man is the Messianic title for Christ. It was also an idiom that people used to refer to themselves in a modest way. It is likely that when people first heard Jesus refer to himself with this title, the audience thought it was in this idiomatic sense. Most likely, later in Jesus's teaching, the followers understood it as the Messianic title.⁸

Characters

Jesus

Closest Followers

Followers

Crowd

Key Terms

Son of Man

Son of Man was the title used most frequently by Jesus to describe himself and is a Messianic title. This title is found in the prophecy in Dan 7:13-14 reflecting his dual nature as both man and God.

Closest Followers/Disciples

The twelve closest companions who traveled with Jesus were called apostles in Scripture.

Follower/Disciple

One who learns from another to adopt their thinking or lifestyle. In the NT they lived in com-

⁶ *Translator's Reference Translation of Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Luke 9:29.

⁷ Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁸ *Translator's Reference Translation of Luke*, Luke 9:60.

munity, traveling together for the purpose of hands-on learning experience, hence followers. "Students" or "apprentice" is sometimes used in dynamic translations.

Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. The kingdom has come and is being established with the presence of Jesus. The kingdom of God also means the kingdom that will come in the future when Christ returns to rule. It is also expressed as the people or the redeemed in God's kingdom.⁹

⁹ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 568.

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Story Guide 21

Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 11:13, 53; 12:1,13-21

Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem sharing the good news, having discussions with religious leaders and common people. One day as Jesus was leaving the home of a religious leader, thousands of people were outside waiting for him!

One man in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me." Jesus answered, "I was not sent here to judge over such matters."

But then Jesus said something important to the entire crowd of people. "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. No matter how many possessions you have or how rich you are, that is not what life is about." Then Jesus told the crowd a story.

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who had a farm and it produced very good crops. He thought to himself, 'What should I do? I don't have enough room to store all my crops. Hmm, I will tear down my current storehouse and build bigger ones. Then I'll have enough room to store everything. I will say to myself, ah, now I have stored enough crops for myself for many years to come! Now I can relax. Eat, drink, and enjoy life!'"

"But then God said to him, 'Foolish man! Tonight, you will die. Someone else will get all those things you have stored up.'"

Then Jesus finished the story he was telling the crowd. "That's what happens to everyone who stores up riches for himself only but does not have a rich and strong relationship with God."

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus continued toward Jerusalem, sharing the good news with all walks of life. The religious establishment who had been curious became openly hostile toward Jesus. He rebuked them for their attitude toward the religious ceremonies they engaged in to disguise their internal, heart character. The religious leaders began to criticize and provoke Jesus to build a legal case against him. Jesus then warned about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Luke 11:37-12:11). All the while, great crowds of people followed to hear Jesus's teaching.

It is within this context that Jesus seized the opportunity to emphasize that a true follower's inner nature and their external actions should be consistently the same.¹ When asked to make a judgment on a domestic inheritance case, Jesus addressed the root issue of greed instead.

This explicit teaching of Jesus should raise questions to the congregations filling prosperity churches. Who does their prosperity preacher sound like and live like? The rich fool who focused only on acquiring more wealth, or Jesus who warned against focusing only on possessions? Mbugua suggests, "When he (Jesus) taught his disciples about wealth, he did not teach them secrets of how to attain it. Instead, he told them to let go of loving it. While Jesus showed us—and prepared us for—a simple and hard life, he also made it clear that we should not even want to be rich."²

While it is not sinful to be rich, earthly possessions are not permanent. They belong to God ultimately. Jesus said to be rich in relationship with God. Only one's relationship with God is of eternal significance.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Chose True Prosperity – Moses chose to seek God's kingdom first and foremost. He counted the cost by leaving a life of luxury and then returning to Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery.

The Warning from Solomon – Solomon began his life seeking God first. God rewarded him. Jesus later mentioned him in this narrative proverbially and compared him to the lilies in the field.

Seek the Kingdom – Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount about seeking obedience and righteousness over worldly possessions. Riches in heaven are far more important and eternal.

Lazarus and the Rich Man – The rich man in the story focused only on possessions and was not rich in his relationship with God. Lazarus, a poor man by monetary standards, was rich with God and spends eternity with him.

Healing at the Temple – Peter and John, the closest followers went to the temple daily to pray. When asked for money, Peter said they did not have any. They gave the crippled man what they did have, their faith in God through Jesus.

¹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary v. 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 340.

² Kenneth Mbugua, et al., *PROSPERITY? Seeking the True Gospel* (Nairobi, Kenya: Africa Christian Textbooks, The Gospel Coalition, 2015), 66.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction of the narrative is connected to the previous story, *The Cost of Following*, from Luke 6. Jesus and his companions continued their journey to Jerusalem. The context of this story originates in Luke 11:37-52 when Jesus accepted an invitation to eat at the home of an unnamed Pharisee. We chose to not go into the details of the teaching there, but it does set up the context of the story. No doubt, Jesus's popularity with the crowds was noticed by the religious establishment of the Pharisee and teachers of the law. It is important to balance context and background with story length and reproducibility.

Some scholars suggest that the crowd awaiting Jesus, described by Luke as consisting of "myriads," with a myriad consisting of ten thousand, is an exaggeration. The term "myriad" can mean literally ten thousand, but it can also be translated as "countless," "innumerable," or "many, many."

The man asked Jesus to order or tell his brother to divide or regulate the estate. Scholars agree this was the younger brother. A storyteller could add, "Tell my older brother."³ We have chosen to leave the example story as it reads in most written translations. Jesus responded with an implicit rhetorical question. We have made that an explicit statement for clarity of the story.

The voice of the narrator draws attention to the subject of Jesus's teaching and that it was for everyone, not just the man with the complaint. Jesus used a parallelism, saying "watch out and guard yourselves." The example story breaks this up into an imperative and then a statement. The storyteller should be sure the language of the story is such that this statement is applicable to all, not just to rich people. We made explicit both possessions and riches. Some nomadic groups across Africa and around the

world may not strive to obtain big houses with lots of furniture. Wealth can be in property, animals, wives, and children.

Jesus used a story to fully teach his point about greed. Storytellers should be clear that the man was already rich. Just as Jesus emphasized, the story emphasizes "I" as the rich man is thinking only about himself.

The Greek words for crops, "καρπός, οὐ μ; θερισμός, οὐ μ: that which is harvested—'harvest, crop, fruit, grain'"⁴ are general terms for harvest. It is not a specific crop like corn or maize. We chose the word "storehouse" to represent barns. The range of meaning includes "granaries," "storage place" or "storage buildings." Use the best term in the local context to mean that a variety of crops and other items can be stored there.

The phrase eat, drink and be merry is familiar to those raised in a church tradition. It was a common expression for celebrating a feast. If the local language has a similar and natural expression, it may be used here. We are intentional in the example story to use "enjoy life" for a modern audience.

Note in the example story, we have made the passive clause in Luke 12:20 into an active clause for clarity and interesting storytelling. "Foolish man! Tonight, you will die!" The storyteller should be careful that the audience does not conclude that God cursed the man, and he died due to his success. Rather, someone else will inherit the possessions he thought would guarantee a long, happy life.

The example narrative demonstrates the change of voice from God back to Jesus. Jesus explained the point or the moral of the story. The error of the man was not being rich, but that he only thought of himself. He did nothing to grow in his relationship with God. Jesus used a metaphor "rich toward God." This does

³ Linda Neely et al., eds., *Translator's Notes on Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2013), Luke 12:13.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains v. 1*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 516.

not mean someone must give God money to buy his way into heaven or to have a long life. It means having strong faith in God, living a life that reflects walking with God to please and serve him.

Background Information

Historical

Barns

Large grain silos have been unearthed by archaeologists in the Galilee region. Wealthy, absentee landowners lived in the general area of Sepphoris.

Fool

The Greek term for “fool” (*aphrōn*) is a strong one. In this context it indicates not only stupidity, but moral and spiritual deficiency.⁵

Biblical

Rabbis (Teachers) were commonly asked to settle disputes, because they knew the laws and how to apply them to individual cases. “In Jewish culture it was the oldest son’s responsibility to divide up the inheritance. He would receive twice as much as younger sons”⁶ (Deut 21:17).

Characters

Religious leaders

Jesus

Crowd

Rich Fool

God

Key Terms

Religious leaders

Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes—all constitute the religious establishment of the time of Jesus. They strictly observed the laws of Moses. Pharisees also kept the oral law and traditions. Scribes were the teachers of the religious law, or lawyers. All Jewish priests came from the tribe of Levi.

⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 428.

⁶ *The Translator’s Reference Translation of Luke: Notes* (Dallas TX: SIL International, 2008), Luke 12:13.

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Story Guide 22

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus continued his journey toward Jerusalem. All along the way, he taught and told stories about the kingdom of God to his closest followers, the religious leaders, and crowds of people. One day, Jesus was telling a story to his closest followers, but some religious leaders were listening, too.

When the religious leaders heard Jesus say these things, they scoffed and laughed at him because they loved money. Jesus said to them, "You make yourselves look good in front of people, but God knows what is really in your hearts. The things that people value the most in this world are the things that God hates."

Jesus went on to tell a story. He said, "There was a rich man who wore the best, most expensive clothes. He feasted on the finest foods. He lived in luxury every day. At the gate of his property, there was a poor man, Lazarus, who was laid there. He was covered with sores. He lay there and wanted very much the leftover food scraps that fell from the rich man's meals. Even dogs would come and lick the sores on his body."

"Finally, the poor man died, and angels from God took him to heaven. There in heaven, Lazarus sat close to grandfather Abraham. The rich man died too, and he was buried. He went to hell where he suffered in torment in the fires of hell. Far away, the rich man could see grandfather Abraham in heaven, and beside him was the poor man Lazarus!"

"The rich man cried out, 'Grandfather Abraham, please, I beg you, have mercy on me! Please, send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and touch my tongue to cool it off. I am suffering terribly in this fire.' But Abraham responded, 'Son, remember when you lived on earth, you had everything you wanted. Lazarus suffered a difficult life. But now Lazarus is here with me in heaven. He is being comforted, and you are suffering. Besides, God put a great pit between us. No one can cross it.'"

“The rich man begged again, ‘Please Grandfather Abraham, send Lazarus to my father’s house to warn my five brothers to repent, turn away from their disobedience and sin, and turn and follow God. I don’t want them to come to this place of suffering and torment.’ But Abraham said no. “‘They have been warned by the Scriptures written by Moses and the prophets. Your brothers can read and listen to that.’”

“The rich man answered, ‘No, Grandfather Abraham! But if someone goes to them from the dead to warn them, then they will turn away from their sins and turn to God.’ But Abraham answered, ‘If they won’t listen to what is written in Scriptures, they won’t listen even if a dead man comes back to life to warn them.’”

That is the story about the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus told his closest followers and the religious leaders.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus did not shy away from teaching about money and its temptation to corrupt. He openly addressed the religious establishment when their values were counter-kingdom. Jesus illustrated through the narrative that a poor but righteous man found justice in heaven. Conversely, the rich man who lived in luxury suffered for eternity because he did not seek a right relationship with God. The rich man demonstrated this when he ignored the suffering of a man just outside the gate to his compound.

Today's prosperity theology and the mindset of the first-century Pharisees are similar, seeing wealth as a primary measure of one's relationship to God. They believe the lack of money equals a lack of faith. Greed is prioritized over holiness in pulpits around the world today. Regarding prosperity teaching in Ghana, Jeffery Amo-Asare wrote, "Even an alien who enters the church for the first time will see an evidence of the power of money reigning in it today; the church has been structured to be dependent on money rather than the Holy Spirit."¹

An article from the 2019 *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* echoed this. "Lately, Neo-prophetic churches especially in Ghana have come under severe criticism from some religious leaders, the public and scholars for numerous reasons. Key among the criticisms are the overly spiritual nature of its activities and promoting the gospel of prosperity/money at the expense of holiness. The major targets for this incessant criticism have been Neoprophets; who are accused of financially milking their patrons dry through the sales of religious items. Sales of oils, beverages, books, and literature are touted to change one's destiny."²

Ironically, this greed-based rhetoric is not the message of the teaching of Jesus. This story Jesus shared portrays a reversal in fortune. This is a popular narrative with community testing groups in Western Africa. The rich man was not

condemned because he was rich. Lazarus was not righteous because he was poor. The rich man discovered too late that repentance was required (Luke 16:30). The storyteller or small group participants should bring this out in the story processing time.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

God Chose Abraham – God chose Abraham as a patriarch of the faith. Through his lineage, all the people of the world would be blessed through him. The rich man saw Lazarus beside Abraham in heaven. For Jesus's Jewish audience, this was a vivid cultural picture of paradise.

Moses Chose True Prosperity/Moses Interceded for God's Presence – Moses found his identity in God rather than in his circumstances. He chose obedience over wealth and comfort in this world. God offered to start over with his chosen people through Moses, but Moses sought God's presence more than anything. Lazarus was poor monetarily but rich in faith.

Jeremiah – Jeremiah chose a life of obedience rather than comfort. He endured earthly suffering in God's sovereignty.

Seek the Kingdom of God – Jesus said to store up riches in heaven that cannot be destroyed. Lazarus had no earthly riches but found his eternal home in paradise. The rich man had plenty of riches on earth but failed to repent.

Cost of Following – Jesus taught that to be a follower is to expect suffering. Lazarus had nothing but a right relationship with God. The rich man had plenty of riches on earth, but it cost him everything because he failed to repent.

¹ Jeffrey Amo-Asare, "The Church Is Losing Its Efficacy," *Graphic Online*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/the-church-is-losing-its-efficacy.html>.

² Isaac Forson Adjei, et al., "The Rhetoric of Commercial Prophets in Ghana: A Case Study of Bishop Daniel Obinim and Reverend Obofour," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*. 5-3 (2019):94-105, doi.org/10.32051/09301910.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction is similar to previous stories Jesus taught on his journey toward Jerusalem. Consistency builds confidence, and confidence inspires good storytelling and broad story sowing that leads to spiritual conversations. Jesus interacted with all walks of life: rich, poor, religious elites, and social outcasts. Jesus consistently told stories to engage his audiences. As Jesus shared this story, he taught his disciples as well as the eavesdropping Pharisees.

Often, storytellers make the mistake of leaving out the context for this narrative. Some will launch into the story that Jesus shared. But take note of Luke 16:14, 15. The ongoing hostilities between Jesus and the Pharisees continued to build. He taught the Pharisees and his disciples with this story. In verse 14, the Pharisee's reaction is literally an idiom, "turned up their nose." It means to ridicule, scoff, make fun, laugh at. Scholars point out that the tension suggests that the Pharisees were sneering while listening.³ This makes for a vivid scene that prepares the audience for Jesus's response.

Jesus responded, "You are those who justify yourselves" (claim to be just) as found in familiar translations such as the ESV, KJV, NASB, and NIV. We unpacked this phrase with the modern audience in mind, "You make yourselves look good in front of people" (NCV).

"God knows your heart" is understood to mean the center of emotions, the core of oneself. He knows what you are really like. Some cultures recognize a different organ of the body to be their center. Storytellers can substitute an organ in this context. It is implicit information that God knows the heart and judges the intentions. He knows what we are really like. If judgment is not clearly understood, the storyteller should make it explicit to the local audience.

Jesus then made a general statement regarding what is highly valued by men. The term "men" here is inclusive, men and women. The things that most people value are detestable, abominable, hated by God.

The example story moves to Luke 16:19 with a short introduction where Jesus told a story. Although there is scholarly debate about whether the story was about real people, it should be clear to the audience that Jesus is telling a story. Some traditions give the rich man a name, but that is highly discouraged. This nameless rich man is part of the reversal lore that Jesus used. The characters, though vivid, are not real people.

We did not go into detail about the rich man wearing royal clothing that is signified by the purple color. This may be an unfamiliar detail and may not seem to have relevance today. An audience will quickly understand the terms used here as "best and most expensive." The short, punchy sentence describing his lifestyle is intentional to draw in the audience to his excesses. Feasting and luxury characterized his lifestyle.

The story is rich in reversal contrast. The poor man was named but not the rich man. The rich man's name is not in the text and should not be added to the story. It is most likely that the poor man was not physically able to walk to the rich man's house, so the detail is intentional that he was laid or put by the gate to beg. In some contexts, across Africa and around the world, tables are not used to eat a meal. A storyteller may use "table," but the local context should be considered. The detail of the dog licking the sores added to Lazarus's misery. These were not domesticated pets but wild street dogs.

The reversal of fortune should be emphasized by the storyteller. For instance, the angels of God took Lazarus to heaven. The rich man was buried but went to hell. Heaven is implicit infor-

³ Richard C. Blight, *Exegetical Helps on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2007), 181.

mation made explicit. We chose "Grandfather" to reference Abraham. He was a distant ancestor. "Grandfather" is a term of endearment for a distant older relative across sub-Saharan Africa. If a more appropriate term exists in the local language, it should be used here.

When the rich man died, he went to the place of eternal punishment. We have chosen to go with the more familiar term "hell" (NIV, NET). "Most Bible scholars think 'hades' refers to 'hell' in this context, especially since this is a place of punishment and severe suffering."⁴

As a reminder, this is a captivating story that Jesus told. Communication between hell and heaven is not possible. The storyteller should keep the story line as Jesus narrated it. Clarifying statements can be addressed during the discussion and processing time following the story.

The rich man is the beggar and begged for sympathy from Abraham. He "cried out" and "begged," both of which are explicit terms describing someone of lower status desperate for help from an affluent person. The rich man realized there was no hope to escape from hell. He appealed to Grandfather Abraham, not Lazarus, for sympathy. Abraham responded with a term of endearment, "son." The rich man was not his biological child. If there are better terms for "Grandfather" and "son" in the local language, they may be used there. The term "suffering" is intentionally used in this story. It is an ongoing theme throughout the story set. The great chasm, gorge, ravine, pit or space dividing heaven and hell is permanent and so placed by God.

The rich man begged Abraham again for his father's house or his family to be warned. It is a parenthetical clause that described his five brothers. Storytellers should be sensitive to

their audience as to the best way to phrase this. It would be accurate to say, "his family," "his brothers," or "his people." He did not refer to a physical building.

We have defined the word repentance for the sake of clarity of this crucial term. It should be clear to the audience that Abraham's response was "No." Through God's written word, Moses and the prophets warned the rich man, Lazarus, and all the Jews of impending judgment. We have chosen the term "Scriptures." Ordinary people did not own personal copies of the Scriptures. They would have heard them read and discussed at their local synagogue weekly. There is no excuse for having lost his chance to repent.⁵ The storyteller should be clear that one's understanding of repentance is not based on their literacy level.

We do not say "Word of God" in this story. So-called modern-day prophets loosely use the phrase "God's Word" or "word from God." It is not in reference to the Bible as we know it, but rather their own alleged personal revelation that God told them.⁶

In the phrase "If they won't listen," "listen" in this context is to "pay attention to" (NIV). The example story uses dialogue intentionally as a mnemonic device. This is a common language feature in African languages. We have made explicit that the purpose of the returning dead person is to warn people to repent.

Scholars agree that Jesus was perhaps alluding to Jesus's own resurrection. Even miracles such as these will not convince some people. The storyteller should not be tempted to add these teaching details into the actual story. The storyteller should discuss these in the post story processing session.

⁴ *The Translator's Reference Translation of Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Luke 16:23.

⁵ TRT, *Luke*, 16.29.

⁶ Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, MO. Author, 2017), Kindle edition.

Background Information

Historical

Reversal role narratives, such as the rich man and Lazarus, were well known in Jewish and Egyptian myth.⁷

Biblical

Mocking

As Jesus taught his disciples, the Pharisees were there listening and mocking. "They considered their wealth to be a proof that God had blessed them for their observance of the Law and they ridiculed Jesus, pointing out that he was just a poor teacher with poor disciples and because of that he was preaching against riches. It was easy to speak of money with disdain when one lacks it as Jesus did."⁸

Lazarus

Lazarus was a common name, Greek for Eleazar. It means "God has helped."

Hell

The Jews believed hell and heaven (Gehenna and Paradise) were physically close to each other. Jesus made it clear there was no hope of escape from hell. The chasm prevented entering heaven.

Scraps

In the story, Lazarus longed for the food that fell from the table of the rich man. The rich used chunks of their round bread as a napkin. After wiping their hands off, they would throw it on the floor. This is the food Lazarus would have loved to have.⁹

Characters

Jesus

Closest Followers

Religious Leaders

Rich man

Lazarus the poor man

Abraham

Key Terms

Hell

Hell is a place of eternal punishment and suffering for those who do not repent of their sins and follow God through Jesus. It is characterized by fire and darkness.

Repentance

Repentance means to change one's direction, to turn away from sin and disobedience and turn to follow God through Jesus Christ.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary v. 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 422.

⁸ Richard C. Blight, 181.

⁹ Larry Allen et al., eds., *Translator's Notes on Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2010), Luke 16:21.

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Story Guide 23

Find True Life!

Matthew 16:1-6, 21-28

For several weeks, Jesus continued to take time to teach crowds of people, and the religious leaders continued to try to trick Jesus. They asked, "Give us a sign that God sent you." Jesus knew they really wanted to discredit him in public. Jesus told them, "Only unfaithful, evil people ask for a sign. But a sign is coming. Remember the prophet, Jonah? God saved him after three days. There will be a sign like that for you."

Then Jesus and his closest followers left the crowds, and Jesus warned them, "Be careful of the wrong teachings of those religious leaders."

Jesus explained to his closest followers, "I must go to Jerusalem. I will suffer terrible things caused by the religious leaders. I will be killed. On the third day, I will come back to life." One of the closest followers, Peter, scolded Jesus and said, "God forbid it! No, may this not happen!" Then Jesus told Peter, "Get away from me, Satan. You are a dangerous trap to me. The way you are thinking is like a man, not like God."¹

Jesus turned and said to all the closest followers, "If anyone wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way and be ready to suffer and even die for following me. Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me will find true life."

"What good will it do if you own the whole world but lose your soul and die spiritually? Is there anything worth more than your soul?"

"The day is coming when I will reward and punish all people according to what they have done."

¹ Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 529.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Matthew recorded this story about Jesus having had another run-in with the religious establishment. Just as Luke emphasized in Luke 9:21–25, Jesus decided resolutely to travel to Jerusalem. This encounter with the religious establishment gave Jesus the opportunity to prepare the disciples for his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus went on to clearly explain again what the cost of following would be. The cost of following was also a call to expect suffering.

Peter said in the events prior to this story that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (Matt 16:13–19). The rest of the followers understood this as well (Matt 16:20). Jesus began to teach his followers what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ. It did not mean an earthly kingdom or an impending overthrow of the Roman government (John 18:36). Jesus corrected Peter sharply. Peter did not think from God’s perspective, but strictly from a human perspective (Matt 16:23; Isa 55:8–9). Jesus said if someone wanted to follow him, they needed to expect suffering.

A theology of suffering is not found in the doctrine of prosperity advocates. In fact, lives of blessings and favor are promised. Many prosperity advocates have become wealthy on self-help books sprinkled with Scripture verses but continue to mischaracterize biblical teaching. One example and best seller is Joel Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. Although marketed as Christian literature, Osteen’s book stretches the interpretation of Scripture to fit the agenda of blessing and favor.

In one part of Osteen’s first step to enlarge your vision, he quotes Psalm 8:5. The ESV translates this verse that refers to the status of humankind, “Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” Osteen writes,

The word honor could also be translated as “favor,” and favor means “to assist, to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment.” In other

words, God wants to make your life easier. He wants to assist you, to promote you, to give you advantages. He wants you to have preferential treatment. Osteen then asserts, “Consequently—and I say this humbly—I’ve come to expect to be treated differently. I’ve learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is: I’m a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Disobedience – Suffering and death entered the world through the sin of the first man and woman.

The Suffering of Abraham: Abraham and Isaac – Abraham, the great patriarch of the faith, was not spared from suffering. He suffered leaving his family to go to a place God would show him. He and his wife Sarah suffered infertility, and then God asked him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac.

Joseph the Dreamer/Joseph the Servant Leader – Joseph went through decades of suffering as he walked the journey God had for him.

The Suffering Savior – The promised Savior himself would suffer to reconcile people to God.

Suffering Because of Obedience, Jeremiah – God called Jeremiah as a young man to be his spokesman with an unpopular message. Though he lived in obedience, Jeremiah suffered.

Seek the Kingdom of God – As recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem and taught the crowds he attracted. He told the crowds to seek God’s kingdom first, and God would provide for their needs.

Cost of Following – As recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem and taught the crowds he attracted. Jesus stated plainly to be prepared to suffer.

favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me.²

Osteen's teaching on favor is not found in the biblical text. Of the fifty-five English translations reviewed, none chose to translate honor as "favor." *Honor* should not be understood to mean that one deserves preferential treatment as a follower of Jesus.

On the contrary, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24 ESV). Be prepared to suffer or die. Osteen's claim of "favor" could sound farfetched to the many modern-day followers of Jesus who are suffering around the world because of their choice to follow God through Jesus only. One modern martyr is Reverend Lawan Andimi of Nigeria. He was kidnapped by the terrorist organization Boko Haram. Boko Haram filmed a video of Andimi to prove to his family, friends, and church he was alive. Andimi turned his proof of life video into a powerful testimony. He was later beheaded by Boko Haram.³ The faith of pastors like Andimi should rattle the hearts of the multimillionaire prosperity advocates and the word of faith promoters with the same question Jesus asked his disciples, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt 16:26 ESV)

² Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: FaithWords, 2004), 38, 39.

³ Jayson Casper, "Boko Haram Executes Pastor Who Turned Hostage Video into Testimony," *Christianity Today*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/nigeria-boko-haram-kidnapped-pastor-hostage-video-testimony.html>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction is brief, reminding the audience of the previous stories. It is important to set the context of the story in the introduction. This background allows the audience to visualize the setting of the story, remember the characters in previous stories, and reveal the new plot line.

Jesus continued to focus on teaching the crowds as well as his closest followers—the twelve disciples—and the Pharisees. We use consistent terms in the stories, such as “religious leaders” for Pharisees for the sake of reproducibility and accurate understanding of a term. Many Bible translations use a transliterated word for these terms. In this story, the religious leaders are both the Pharisees and Sadducees. Though the two groups normally did not get along, they did join forces to demand a sign from Jesus to try to publicly disgrace him. “This verb means to obtain information to be used against a person by trying to cause that person to make a mistake.”⁴ Scholars agree that they demanded a uniquely apocalyptic demonstration such as fire in the sky.⁵ Prophets in the history of the Jewish people such as Elijah were associated with such displays. The term generation refers to people alive at that time. “Unfaithful” generation is the term used for “adulterous.” It does not suggest a sexual component.

This is the second time in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus referenced the “sign of Jonah.” He used the term in Matt 12:39 and explained it in verse 40, “in the belly of a great fish for three days.” The original audience of Matthew would have understood the reference regarding Jonah. We have included an explanation of the sign for the modern audience but did not

mention the great fish as it would require a lengthy explanation.

Jesus warned the disciples by using figurative language. Jewish tradition equated evil with yeast used in bread.

The focus of this narrative is Matt 16:21–28. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus explained to his disciples that he **must** go to Jerusalem. This is his divine appointment to fulfill the requirements of the true Christ. Jesus shared the impending series of his suffering, death, and resurrection. It also marks the turning point of Jesus’s ministry. He began to clarify what it meant to be the Christ.

Peter responded with a strong protest. Matthew used the phrase that is literally translated as “mercy to you” from the original language. This mercy originated from God. Most translations say, “heaven forbid” or “God forbid!” Peter verbalized his misunderstanding of what the Messiahship was all about.

Jesus gave a sharper response to Peter. It is the same response Jesus gave Satan in the temptation story in the wilderness: to get behind, to get away (Matt 4:10). We have been consistent with the two stories, using “get away.” Story crafters should be careful not to word the phrase as if Satan is possessing Peter. He is not. Peter’s words reflected Satan’s ideas of preventing Jesus from going to the cross and ultimately fulfilling his Messianic destiny. Jesus did not cast out Satan from Peter.

Traditionally, the next phrase spoken to Peter has been translated, “you are a stumbling block” (NIV). Scholars argue about the word picture for this Greek term. “σχάνδαλον was the bait stick of a trap, the mechanism that triggered off the trap when a bird or animal touched it. One may *fall* over a stumbling block

⁴ David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of Matthew 1-16*, Exegetical Summaries (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2013), 563.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary v. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 247.

and yet may rise again. But this is not the case with a *skandalon*, for merely to touch the bait affixed to it would spring the trap, and Jesus would be *caught* in its death grip.”⁶

We have inverted the reasoning in the phrase that “Peter is thinking like a man, not like God” for the modern audience.

Jesus cautioned all his disciples—present and future—anyone of “those who would come after me.” There is the concrete sense of followers physically behind him on the road to Jerusalem, but the following in this sense is figurative in a sense of discipleship, being an adherent, a student.

Jesus called these followers to deny themselves. We have chosen the phrase from the NLT which unpacks it as “you must give up your own way” in order to be thought-provoking. This discussion should take place in the post-story session. It is important to keep the narrative as the narrative and not weigh it down with additional commentary or teaching. This guards the reproducibility of the story.

To the first-century audience, the cross was a symbol of shame, suffering, and death introduced by the Roman Empire. Jesus called the would-be followers to prepare for persecution but also to look past that for the glory of God.⁷

Jesus explained to the disciples that anyone trying to hang onto their physical life would end up losing it. Jesus spoke of both physical and eternal life here. Jesus then spoke with an exaggerated statement and a rhetorical question, “What good will it be if you gain/own/profit/benefit the whole world” in the financial sense? Jesus then used a figure of speech, to “lose their soul,” that meant to die spiritually.

The soul is the part of the person that lives on after the physical body dies. We have made that explicit in the example narrative. Jesus emphasized that only eternal life is of true value.

We conclude the story with verse 27, replacing “Son of Man” with the personal pronoun “I” for Jesus. “Son of Man” was Jesus’s favorite title for himself. When Jesus returns, he will bring his ultimate judgment in his Father’s authority. He will reward the believers and punish non-believers. The phrase should not be interpreted as a guarantee that Jesus will lavish riches in this life on faithful believers.

Background Information

Historical

The Cross

It was an instrument of execution used by the Romans. It was looked upon as a particularly painful form of death, and the Romans reserved it for slaves and foreigners. The condemned man was required to carry his cross, or the crossbeam, to the place of execution. Crucifixion was a familiar sight in Jesus’s day, and it easily became a symbol of discipleship.⁸

Characters

Jesus

Peter

Closest Followers

Religious Leaders

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 430.

⁷ Richard Thomas France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 410.

⁸ Barclay M. Newman and Phillip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 313.

Key Terms

Closest Followers/Disciples

The twelve close companions who traveled with Jesus.

Religious leaders

Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes—all constitute the religious establishment of the time of Jesus. They strictly observed the laws of Moses. Pharisees also kept the oral law and traditions. Scribes were the teachers of the law, or lawyers. All Jewish priests came from the tribe of Levi. In verse 21, the elders, chief priests,

and scribes are referenced specifically. This is a reference to the Sanhedrin. This was the official ruling council of the Jewish people. They were based in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin was the highest ruling body in Israel. These men lived and worked in Jerusalem.⁹

Son of Man

This is the title used most frequently by Jesus to describe himself, and it is a Messianic title. This title is found in the prophecy in Dan 7:13–14 reflecting his dual nature as both man and God.

⁹ Randy Groff, ed., *Translator's Notes on Matthew: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2016), Matt 16:1.

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Story Guide 24

Leave Everything (All Abandoned)

Luke 18:18-29

Jesus continued to teach his closest followers as well as the crowds about the kingdom of God, where God is the king of your life. A rich religious leader asked Jesus a question. He said to Jesus, "Good Teacher, sir, what should I do to have eternal life, a life with God that never ends?"

Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? Only God is that kind of good. You know the commands. Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not lie in a legal trial or about other people, honor your father and mother."

The man said, "Yes, I have obeyed all of those commands since I was young."

When Jesus heard this, he then said to the man, "There is one more thing you need to do. Sell everything you own and give the money to the poor people. Then you will have eternal life with God forever. Then come follow me."

But when the man heard this, he was very sad because he was very rich.

Jesus said, "It's very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God." Then Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the hole of a sewing needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

When the people in the crowd heard this, they said, "Who then can be saved from the punishment of our disobedience?"

Jesus told them, "It is impossible for anyone to save himself, but it is possible for God."

Peter said to Jesus, "We have left everything and followed you."

Jesus said, "And I promise you that to everyone who has given up their most important things like home, their parents, and brothers or sisters, or children for the sake of God's kingdom, God will give these many times over in this life. You will have eternal life in the world to come."

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus continued to journey toward Jerusalem with his disciples and took every opportunity to teach. He taught his disciples, the crowds, as well as the religious leaders among them. A young man from the rich ruling class came to Jesus and asked a question. Perhaps the question seemed straightforward to the crowd, but Jesus knew the young man's heart and motivations.

The religious leader focused on himself. As he answered Jesus, he arrogantly implied that he had kept the law perfectly since his youth. Jesus then confronted the rich man with the last commandment, the one about not coveting.¹ Jesus gave him the choice, "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me" (Luke 18:22b NCV). Jesus challenged him to a practical application of what Jesus had taught earlier. "No one can serve two masters" (Luke 16:13; Matt 6:24). Jesus told him to liquidate his material wealth and follow Jesus as his only master.

Today's prosperity advocates teach the opposite of Jesus's challenge. There is a preoccupation with earthly wealth and success in prosperity and word of faith ministries. Health, wealth, or victory is framed as a simple spiritual transactional relationship. Coveting things that you do not own or coveting perfect health is encouraged. Costi Hinn shares an example from his personal experience with his uncle, Benny Hinn:

In one sermon I heard growing up, my uncle taught us that if we wanted God to do something for us, we needed to do something for him. This applied to everything—especially miracles. Whenever possible, Benny would preach to the masses that if they wanted a miracle for their sickness and disease, they needed to give money to God. No money? No miracle! Giving to God was the secret to

unlocking your dreams. It was the secret to job promotions. It was access to our divine bank account."²

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Moses Interceded for God's Presence –

God's people were delivered from Egypt and entered into a covenant/sacred agreement relationship with God. The law with the Ten Commandments was outlined and accepted by the Israelites. God's people remained under the law and the commandments, and Jesus quoted them to the rich young ruler, the crowd, and his disciples as part of his teaching.

Instructions for life – The Psalmist prayed not to have a love of money, but money ensnared the rich young ruler. He walked away from salvation to hold on to his wealth.

Seek the Kingdom of God – On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus explained to the crowd and his followers that no one can serve two masters completely at the same time. Jesus challenged the rich young ruler to make his choice. God takes care of his children as they rely on him.

The Cost of Following – On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus explained to the crowd and his followers that there is a cost to following him. The rich ruler wanted his wealth and status in this life more than he wanted a right relationship with God.

Rich Man and Lazarus – On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus told a story to illustrate his point to both his disciples and the religious leaders that riches in this life are worthless in light of eternity if one ignores a right relationship with God. The rich young ruler claimed to have kept the commandments but did not choose to distribute his wealth to the poor. The rich man ignored Lazarus at his gate.

¹ Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, and Luke v. 8*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 1003.

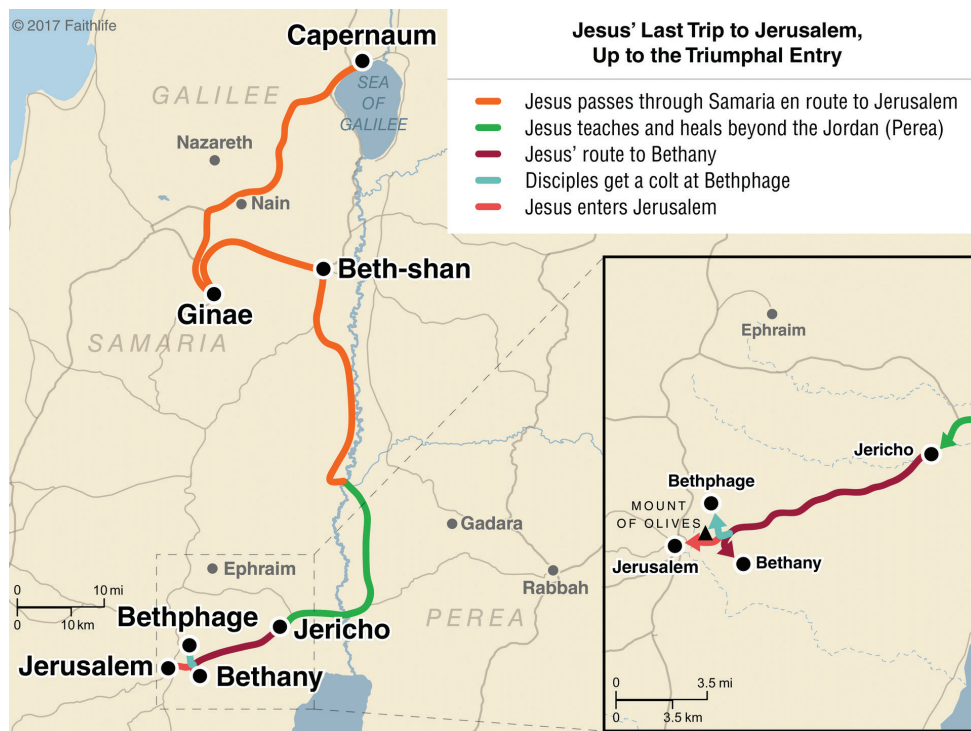
² Costi W. Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 46.

On Benny Hinn’s ministry website via an electronic newsletter, he cites the parallel passage from the Gospel of Mark and assures his donors: “Jesus Himself promised that those who have sacrificed anything, including houses and lands, for His sake and the Gospel’s will ‘receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses ... and lands ... and in the age to come, eternal life’ (Mark 10:29–30 NKJV).”³

In response to Peter, Jesus promised that whoever left their homes and families, for his sake, would be repaid many times over (Luke 18:30). The repayment is not a financial repayment. It is through the church family, spiritual parents, brothers, sisters, and children in Christ. Stein explained, “In the present life believers may lose this family as a result of following Jesus, but they will receive a much larger family, the family of believers (see Luke 8:21; Mark 3:35). What a person gives to God is returned many times over not just in the age to come but even in this life.”⁴ Luke later reported this fulfillment in Acts 4:32–35.

While prosperity proponents encourage such breakthroughs of wealth or job promotion, Jesus warned the opposite. It is very difficult for the rich to be saved. Jesus made a radical call to discipleship to the young man and to us today. Where was his (and our) allegiance? Reliance on money rather than on God is too tempting.

Jesus told the rich, religious man to sell his goods and give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Jesus. Jesus did not ask for the money for his ministry. Though the man was physically rich, he was spiritually poor. The man misunderstood his wealth, position, and salvation were not based on his keeping the commandments. Jesus pointed out that it was impossible for man to earn eternal life. He called for heart change through grace. Only by God’s grace does one find eternal life with God (Eph 2:8–9).



³ Benny Hinn Ministries, *Greatest Wealth Transfer*, 2022, <https://www.bennyhinn.org/enewsletter/greatest-wealth-transfer>.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary v. 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 459.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction of the example story links previous stories as Jesus and his disciples continued their journey to Jerusalem. Jesus interacted with crowds, earnest followers, and skeptical religious leaders. Jesus told stories and taught about the kingdom of God—the reign and rule of God now and in the future for eternal life with God. Like many key biblical terms, “kingdom of God” is unpacked in the story for the audience to have a short definition. Here, it is unpacked to mean “where God is the king of your life.” The story crafter should be careful not to use a word that would mean a geographic kingdom only.

The narrative of the rich young ruler appears in all three synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The story crafter should be careful not to use a word that would lead the audience to think he was a village chief or a Roman official. He belonged to the noble class of educated, wealthy religious leaders. Luke 18:23 describes him as rich. We have put this detail out of chronological order to reveal to the audience an interesting detail. Matthew 20:22 explains that he was a young man. Commentators suggest his age was past puberty but before marriage.⁵

The young man addressed Jesus as “Good Teacher.” Although it may have been an attempt at flattery, “Good in this context means morally good, upright, or holy.”⁶ This is why we added “that good” to the example story as a reference to the point that only God is righteous and just. Good is not in reference to Jesus’s teaching ability.

“Teacher” was a polite title used in Jewish culture for a religious leader capable of lecturing

on the Scriptures. A follower of Jesus would have addressed Jesus as Master or Lord.

“Eternal life” is also defined in the story as a life with God that never ends. This does not mean one’s physical body will not die, but life will continue post death.

Jesus quoted to the man the five of the Ten Commandments that relate to one’s community. We also used the word “commands” in the story **Moses Chose True Prosperity**. For consistency, we used that same word in this example story. “False testimony” is put in clearer, modern language for the wider audience. “Do not lie in a legal trial or about other people.” “Court case” is an alternative to “legal trial” if it better serves the target audience.⁷

Some languages have an idiom for “total observance” and can be substituted in the story.

We have worded the rich man’s response, “since I was young,” which means he has kept the commandments since about 12 years old. Use a common phrase to express youth in your culture. “Small boy” is an example from West Africa.

As Jesus referenced certain commandments that a righteous Jewish man would have kept, he omitted the last commandment of do not covet. Jesus addressed the man’s attitude of coveting in his challenge for the man to sell his possessions and give them to the poor. This point should be discussed in the small group time. It is tempting to add teaching material to the narrative. Too much extra material will reduce the reproducibility of sharing the story.

There was one thing lacking. He had one thing he needed to do. Jesus told the man to sell his riches and distribute the proceeds to poor

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains v. 1*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 107.

⁶ Larry Allen et al., eds., *Translator’s Notes on Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2010), Luke 18:18.

⁷ Allen et al., eds., *Translator’s Notes on Luke*, Luke 18:20.

people. Treasure in heaven is eternal life with God, not the money from the rich man's liquidated wealth. The rich man would also give up his social standing when he gave his wealth away. "Come follow me," is the invitation to be a disciple.

The man became very sad. If the language has an idiom or expression for this, substitute it here. The man did not comply with Jesus's challenge. If this is not clear to the audience, it should be made explicit.

Jesus used an exaggerated statement or hyperbole to emphasize his point about the difficulty of rich people entering the kingdom of God. It is only by God's grace. The camel was the largest animal in Israel, and the eye or hole in a sewing needle was the smallest opening. If your local context is not familiar with camels, you can say a "large animal."

The crowd of people asked out of concern "How could anyone be saved?" This is a rhetorical question. If the language of the audience does not use rhetorical questions, it may be changed to a simple statement. The first-century audience thought the material wealth of the rich was a sign of blessing from God. They gave money or "alms" to the poor and sacrifices in the temple to ensure the forgiveness of sin. For the sake of clarity, we have unpacked the term saved—"saved from the punishment of our disobedience." Saved is a word often used in Christian circles, but sometimes not understood by all.

Jesus addressed their concerns. Only God can do what people cannot. He can break the hold of the allure of wealth. Translation scholars unpacked it in the concrete phrase we used in the example story, "Jesus was saying that it is impossible for anyone to save himself, but it is possible for God to save him."⁸

Peter pointed out that he and the other disciples left their professions to follow Jesus. They were not considered poor. It should be clear to the audience that Jesus did not mean that the followers should abandon their families or responsibilities.

In the example story, Jesus responded by saying, "I tell you the truth," or, "I promise you," in a natural dialogue among friends.

For the sake of clarity, we did not use the double negative in the example story: "there is no one who ... who will not receive."

Believers who chose to follow Jesus would be rewarded with spiritual family and a sense of home found in the church. This was not earned but given from God as a gift. It should be clear to the audience that Jesus did not call his followers to be homeless and without family. It was a call that serving the kingdom of God should always be the priority.

Background Information

Historical

Masters/disciples

Judaism emphasized charity heavily, but other Jewish teachers did not normally require a prospective disciple to divest himself entirely of funds. A few teachers, especially some radical Greek teachers (Antisthenes, Zeno, and Diogenes), made such demands on rich students to see if they would value true teaching above their wealth. A rich person would occasionally give up his goods, but rich prospective disciples usually disappointed such radical teachers, failing the test of discipleship and returning to their wealth.⁹

⁸ Allen et al., eds., *Translator's Notes on Luke*, Luke 18:27.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

Elephant/needle

The image of an elephant passing through the eye of the needle is found in the Babylonian Talmud, which was compiled in Mesopotamia where elephants were the largest animals.¹⁰

Biblical

Camel through the eye of the needle

Commentators have made attempts to reframe Jesus's literary exaggeration. Some claim it was not a camel, but a cable or rope. It was suggested that the needle was a gate into Jerusalem where a camel could enter on its knees with no baggage. Scholars rejected these theories as there is no conclusive evidence to support this.¹¹

Characters

Jesus

Rich religious leader

Closest Followers

Peter

Key Terms

Eternal life

Everlasting life, a life that does not end spiritually after the physical body dies. Life forever with God in heaven. It is the opposite of eternal punishment.

Kingdom of God

The reign and rule of God. The kingdom has come because Jesus is present and establishing it. The kingdom of God also means the kingdom that will come when Christ returns to rule. It is also expressed as the people or the redeemed in God's Kingdom.¹²

¹⁰ David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 733.

¹¹ Garland, *Luke*, 733.

¹² James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., in *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 568.

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Story Guide 25

The Suffering of Jesus

Luke 22-23; Matthew 26-27; Mark 15; John 18-19

Jesus and his closest followers were traveling to Jerusalem. Along the way, he taught people, healed people, and even forgave people of their sins when they turned back to God. An important religious festival was going on in Jerusalem. Not all the religious leaders liked what Jesus did or what he said about himself. They plotted to have the government officials execute Jesus, even though Jesus had never done anything wrong. One of Jesus's closest followers, Judas, secretly offered to betray Jesus into their hands. But Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him.

Before the festival, Jesus and his closest followers had a special meal. Afterward, he took them to a garden to pray together. He said to them, "I am overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Please sit and watch and pray with me awhile." Jesus went a little further on, fell on his knees, and cried out to God. He said, "Father if you are willing, take this suffering away from me. But I want what you want, Father, not what I want." An angel came from God to give Jesus strength to continue praying.

Three times, Jesus went back to his closest followers, but he found them asleep. Finally, he woke them up and said, "Look, my betrayer is coming." As they got up and looked, they saw Judas, leading a band of men with swords and clubs coming to arrest Jesus. This mob arrested Jesus and sent him to the governor for trial.

It was an unjust trial, but Jesus remained silent. The authorities sentenced Jesus to be executed. The guards whipped and beat Jesus repeatedly. The soldiers took him out to the place where they executed the lowest of criminals. Two criminals were executed along with Jesus. The soldiers stripped Jesus naked and laid him on two beams of wood put together as a cross. They nailed his hands and his feet to the cross. Jesus cried out, "Father God, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." They raised up the cross, and Jesus was hanging there for hours, naked, in pain and agony. People came by and insulted him and mocked him.

One of the criminals on the cross beside Jesus also mocked Jesus, "So you're the Promised Savior, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!" But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come back with your kingdom." Jesus said to him, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."

By this time, it was about noon, but it grew dark, and around 3 p.m. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Finally, Jesus cried out one more time, "It is finished," and he breathed his last. And Jesus died.

One of the religious leaders, Joseph from Arimathea, did not agree with the others to have Jesus killed. He asked the governor for Jesus's body. He wrapped the body up in clean, fine cloths and put it in a new tomb carved out of a rock. He placed a huge rock in front of it. Some of the women followers of Jesus followed to see where they put his body so they could come later and properly prepare his body for burial. Later on, the governor placed a seal on the rock and a guard of soldiers around it so no one could come to steal his body.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus and his disciples arrived in Jerusalem after days of travel and ministry. They were there to celebrate Passover. Jesus prepared his disciples by warning them that he would suffer, die, but be raised to life to fulfill God's plan for man's redemption (Matt 16:21; John 3:16; Heb 9:28). Even with multiple warnings, the disciples did not understand fully the culminating sacrifice Jesus would make (Matt 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

The example composite narrative is explicit in the different facets of Jesus's suffering. Jesus endured physical torture, emotional trauma, and spiritual agony. Followers of Jesus to this day suffer in this fallen world. Yet, Jesus is sympathetic to our suffering (Heb 4:15; 12:2-3).

Prosperity and word of faith adherents teach that the atonement was not accomplished on the cross. Instead, they teach that Jesus died spiritually and was tortured three days in hell to secure atonement. It can be traced to the father of the prosperity movement, E.W. Kenyon, and adaptations from his study of the cultic and metaphysical practices.

McConnell points out that the claims from the prosperity and word of faith theology are false. "This results in a heretical doctrine of Identification, which denies the physical nature of the atonement, asserts that Christ became a demoniac and was 'born-again' in hell, and teaches that believers can be transformed into incarnations of God (=deification)."¹

Modern-day faith teachers perpetuate this false doctrine. Frederick K. C. "Fred" Price was the founder and long-time pastor of the Crenshaw Christian Center in suburban Los Angeles, CA. In 1990 he founded the Fellowship of International Christian Word of Faith Ministries. Price wrote,

Do you think that the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case,

the two thieves could have paid your price. No the punishment was to go into hell itself and to serve time in hell separated from God.... Satan and all the demons of hell thought that they had him bound, and they threw a net over Jesus and they dragged Him down to the very pit of hell itself to serve our sentence.²

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Disobedience – God promises Adam and Eve that their descendant will smash the head of the enemy. It is through the suffering of Jesus that the enemy is defeated.

God Chose Abraham – God promised Abraham that through him all the peoples of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus fulfilled this promise and provided the opportunity for all peoples to be reconciled to God.

Suffering Savior – Isaiah promised a Savior would come to bear the punishment for our sin and disobedience. Jesus was beaten and endured the suffering and shame of the cross. He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Jeremiah – Despite the punishment of exile for breaking the covenant and worshiping false idols, through Jeremiah, God promised a Savior would come and bring hope to the people. That Savior is Jesus.

Resurrection – The Savior Jesus then returned to life demonstrating power over death and reconciling humankind for eternity with God.

Suffering is Finished – The day is coming when Jesus will return. God will live among his people. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death, no more pain, no more suffering. God will announce, "It is finished."

¹ Dan R. McConnell. *A Different Gospel*, Upd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2011), 165.

² McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 169.

“Kenneth Copeland is even more direct in denying the atoning efficacy of Christ’s blood: ‘Jesus went into hell to free mankind from the penalty of Adam’s high treason.... When His blood poured out it did not atone.... Jesus spent three horrible days and nights in the bowels of this earth getting back for you and me our rights with God.’”³ Copeland, a Word of Faith proponent and founder of Kenneth Copeland ministries, also teaches “the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief, and poverty on Jesus at Calvary.”⁴

Grudem points to three verses in Scripture that contradict this doctrine. Jesus knew he would

die physically and immediately be in the presence of Father God in heaven. Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). In John 19:30, Jesus said, “It is finished.” Jesus knew his suffering was over. The atonement was complete. In Luke 23:46, Jesus said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” The suffering and spiritual estrangement was over.⁵

The story of the **Suffering of Jesus**, the crucifixion, remains foundational to our faith and is bedrock in the doctrine of the church. See the bibliography at the end of the chapter to read more about the heretical doctrine of identification and those involved in preaching it.

³ McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 169.

⁴ David Jones and Russel S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness (abridged): How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 147.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, “He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1991): 103-113. http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/he-did-not-descend-into-hell_JETS.pdf.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction begins as many of the previous stories do, referencing Jesus's journey to Jerusalem. It serves as a subtle picture of Jesus's ministry, a ministry oriented toward the cross and the reconciliation he brought through his sacrifice. Due to the nature of this story set, we have crafted a composite narrative from all four Gospel accounts. This story is explicit in the multi-faceted suffering Jesus endured. The passion narrative is normally crafted into multiple stories.

The introduction quickly summarizes Jesus's ministry. The previous stories in this story set revealed the ongoing tensions between Jesus and the religious establishment. The leading priests and elders were meeting at the home of the high priest to plot Jesus's death (Matt 26:3-5). We use the consistent, general term, "religious leaders."

This escalation led to Judas's betrayal (Matt 26:14-16).

The transitional statement, "But Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him," alerts the audience that Jesus was not a victim but a willing sacrifice (Matt 26:1).

The "closest followers" is the consistent way this story set refers to the disciples. They went with Jesus to a garden to pray. We have chosen to call the Mount of Olives, Gethsemane area the "garden" as John 18:1 refers to it in the ESV and NASB. Limiting the use of unfamiliar proper nouns in the story increases the likelihood of a broader audience being able to retell the story accurately.

Jesus uses figurative language to refer to himself, his heart/soul is to the point of death. After Jesus went a short distance away from the disciples, "he fell to the ground." This is an idiom

for kneeling or lying on the ground prostrate to pray. It should be clear that it was an intentional, reverent posture. He did not stumble accidentally.

"Cup" and "Let this cup pass from me," is symbolic language Jesus used. There was not a physical cup in this scene. The example story simply states "suffering" to avoid confusion.

We have summarized Jesus's asking for God's will to be done as "I want what you want, not what I want" for the sake of clarity for the modern audience. Jesus's prayer is in dialogue form in the example story. It shows that his prayer is an intimate, sorrowful prayer to the Father.

The angel's encouragement for Jesus was both mental and physical encouragement. Note the angel did not take away Jesus's suffering.⁶

For the sake of brevity, the dialogue of Jesus with the sleeping disciples is not included in the example narrative.

The farce of a trial is summed up as "unjust" to maintain the flow of the narrative. The detail of Jesus's silence is included as described in the **Suffering Savior** story from Isaiah 53.

Both the brutality and humiliation of Jesus's sentence are included. Victims of crucifixion were stripped naked to further their shame. The proper noun of Golgotha is not included for the sake of brevity and easier reproducibility. We have unpacked the term for the cross, "two beams of wood put together as a cross." One beam was upright, and the other beam was horizontal. Scholars have debated which form was used in Jesus's crucifixion, a cross of either a T shape or a + shape. The intended audience for this story set will be familiar with the term cross, but we have included it as a reminder that not everyone may understand this Christian term correctly.

⁶ *Translator's Reference Translation of Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Luke 22:43.

Jesus asked God to forgive the soldiers. “They don’t know what they’re doing” in the sense of understanding or realizing their actions, he said.

We have made it explicit that Jesus suffered for hours.

The two criminals were also sentenced to die by crucifixion as “evil doers” in the original language. Be sure it is clear to the audience that there were three men sentenced to die, and each on a separate cross. One criminal mocked Jesus. He said, “If you’re the Messiah” (Hebrew) ... We have used the term “Promised Savior” for Messiah.

The criminal, soldiers, and others who mocked Jesus also mocked God’s power.⁷

“The Greek word that the NIV translates as *paradise* refers to a place of happiness where people who love God go when they die. In this context its meaning is similar to the meaning of the Greek word that is used for ‘heaven,’ the place where God lives. The English and Greek words for *paradise* came from the Hebrew word that can refer to a beautiful garden with many fruit trees.”⁸

We have included the reference to time, “noon” (“sixth hour,” ESV) “until 3 p.m.” (“ninth hour”) in modern language for today’s audience.

Jesus quoted Psalm 22 when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We have gone with the modern term “abandoned” rather than forsaken. Translation resources suggest abandoned, left, or deserted.⁹

The Gospel of John recorded Jesus’s final words as “It is finished.” This is a reference to his suffering but also the completion of the

work God called him to do. It is important that it is clear in the story that Jesus died.

We chose to use the name of the religious leader’s name, Joseph of Arimathea, who claimed Jesus’s dead body. Although his name is not repeated in future stories, we have added his name in this story for the purpose of character development. The details of how he handled Jesus’s body showed respect and care in the Jewish culture.

Joseph had Jesus’s body wrapped in fine linen cloth, a Jewish tradition. We have opted for a more generic phrasing, “fine cloth,” because linen, made from flax, may not be a material that people groups throughout Africa have locally.

See the photo below of a first-century tomb, a cave cut into the limestone hillside. It is necessary to be explicit about the tomb in the story as it is unlike many graves in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world. “Along with the female followers who watched Jesus’s burial” foreshadows the next story of Resurrection.

The details about the governor sealing the tomb and posting guards are included in the



A first-century tomb near Mount Carmel, Israel.
Photo by Judy Miller.

⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 806.

⁸ Linda Neely et al., eds., *Translator’s Notes On Luke: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2010), Luke 23:43.

⁹ *Translator’s Reference Translation of Mark* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2013), Mark 15:34.

story. The religious leaders asked Pilate to post guards (Matt 27:62-37). This is to dispel any challenge that Jesus did not actually die or that his disciples stole his body.

Background Information

Historical

Prayer posture

"In Jewish culture, people knelt or lay prostrate like this to humble themselves before God in prayer."¹⁰

Biblical

Take this cup

"In the Old Testament a cup is sometimes used as a symbol of punishment and revenge (Isa 51:17; Jer 49:12; Ezek 23:32)."¹¹

Time

"The "sixth hour" began before noon, the "ninth hour" before 3 p.m. Jesus died around the time of the evening offering in the temple. Stories were told of catastrophes occurring at the deaths of pious rabbis, especially those whose intercession had been vital to the world; but the biggest point of these signs is that judgment is imminent. Darkness had signified judgment in the past (Exod 10:21-23) and would in the future."¹²

Jesus's body

In Roman occupation culture, when people died by crucifixion, their bodies decomposed on the cross. Animals and birds fed on their bodies. This served as a brutal reminder that Rome held authority and did not hesitate to enforce it. Families of the deceased could

appeal for the body. Scholars suggest that Pilate granted the request for Jesus's body promptly because he did not find him guilty of charges that warranted this punishment.

The seal

"The securing of the tomb would have involved the application to the stone of some kind of substance, perhaps a soft clay, impressed with the Roman imperial stamp. The seal would then be attached to the stone with a large rope or cord. The presence of the soldiers themselves would have been the greater deterrent to a posse trying to roll away the rock and steal the body, but the seal would have been more permanent and made grave robbing an illegal, punishable offense."¹³

Characters

Jesus

Closest followers

Joseph of Arimathea

Judas

Religious leaders

Two criminals on crosses

Women followers

Roman soldiers

Key Terms

Religious leaders

Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes—all constitute the religious establishment of the time of Jesus. They strictly observed the laws of Moses. Pharisees also kept the oral law and traditions. Scribes were the teachers of the law, or lawyers. All Jewish priests came from the tribe of Levi. In Mark 15:21, the elders, chief priests, and scribes are referenced specifically. This is a reference to the Sanhedrin. This was the official

¹⁰ Randy Groff and Linda Neeley, eds., *Translator's Notes On Mark: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Mark: 14:35.

¹¹ Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 813-814.

¹² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary v. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 425.

ruling council of the Jewish people. They were based in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin was the highest ruling body in Israel. These men lived and worked in Jerusalem.¹⁴

Closest Followers/Disciples

The twelve close companions who traveled with Jesus.

Promised Savior/Savior

Savior, as used in the New Testament, means “one who saves from spiritual and eternal danger.” Often, the wholeness of man includes both physical and spiritual aspects which are difficult to distinguish, but the actual term savior in the New Testament is used only for Jesus as a spiritual deliverer. “Promised Savior” is the term we’ve chosen to use for the English version of the stories to describe who Jesus is—the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised Savior. We have chosen, for the audience’s first exposure to the gospel, to use a consistent term for Jesus’s role in God’s redemptive plan throughout the story set. You should use a term that is consistent with your theme (such as Promised

King, Anointed One, etc.). The terms Christ and Messiah have the same meaning, namely, “the person who is anointed (i.e., appointed) by God for a special purpose.” Anointing with oil was the symbol of being appointed and set apart by God for a position of authority and responsibility, especially for kingship, or as a high priest. Many aspects of Jesus’s roles and character are implied in the term Anointed One, including his kingship over all the nations, his role as God’s representative, his role as the means of bringing about God’s victory over his enemies, and finally, as the one appointed to accomplish redemption for God’s people. Translation resources suggest that as we search for a way to translate the Messiah or Christ, we should search for a term that includes the concepts of one who is specially appointed by God, and one who is savior or king. Some languages do not have an appropriate personal noun that expresses the idea of savior, and it needs to be translated as “the one who saves,” or “the saving person.”

¹⁴ Randy Groff and Linda Neeley, eds. *Translator’s Notes on Mark: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Mark 15:21.

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Story Guide 26

Alive!

John 20; Mark 16:10-11; Luke 24:36-43

Jesus was executed on a Friday. The next day was the religious day of rest, so when he died there was no time to prepare his body properly before they buried him.

Early Sunday morning, a follower of Jesus named Mary went back to the tomb to finish preparing his body properly. Instead, she found the very large stone that closed the tomb rolled away and no soldiers guarding it. She looked inside the tomb, but Jesus's body was not there! Mary ran back to tell Jesus's closest followers. Peter and John ran back to the tomb to see for themselves. When they got there, they found the fine cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus's body, but they did not find his body. So, they left.

But Mary stayed there. She was weeping and grieving. When she looked into the tomb again, she saw two angels in white. They asked her, "Why are you crying?" Mary said, "They have taken away my master!" She turned to leave, but a man came up to her. She thought he was the gardener, "He said to her, dear woman, why are you crying?" Mary said to him, "Please, sir, if you know where they have put my master's body, tell me, and I will go get him."

He said, "Mary." Suddenly, Mary knew that it was Jesus! She held onto him, and Jesus said, "Don't hold onto me. Go back to my closest followers and tell them that I have risen from the dead." Mary went to tell the closest followers the good news. She told them that Jesus was alive!

That night all the followers were together in a room behind locked doors out of fear of the authorities. Suddenly, Jesus stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you. Don't be afraid. Why do you doubt what you see?" he asked. "Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me. Touch me. Make sure that I am not a ghost. Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him some fish to eat.

Jesus explained many things from the Scriptures to them that night. He said, "Peace be with you. As my Father has sent me, I'm sending you. Preach the message that God forgives those who repent and turn away from their disobedience and turn and follow God through believing in me, Jesus."

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The women followers of Jesus followed Joseph of Arimathea to the new tomb where they put Jesus's body. They planned to prepare the appropriate spices to properly prepare his body for burial. They thought it would be their final act of devotion. Instead, according to the account in the Gospel of John, Mary was the first eyewitness to the risen Savior (John 20:16).

The empty tomb changed everything. When Jesus appeared later to followers in the upper room, he explained again his mission. He explained the relevant texts from the writing of Moses and the prophets. He also cast vision for their future ministry (Luke 24:44-49). This handful of followers who had abandoned Jesus as he suffered would be transformed by the Holy Spirit to be bold proclaimers.

Today the prosperity and word of faith teachers emphasize the power of the resurrection and the transactional value. *Power, victory, breakthrough* are all popular terms used by their prophets and teachers. At first glance, these teachers appear to focus on money, success, and health—and they do. As one looks deeper into their theology, however, it is more troubling.

Arnett writes, "Accordingly, the death and resurrection of Christ emphasizes the personalization of God's power, rather than atonement for sins. Obviously, the fault of this caricature lies in the appropriation of power for human interests. In this way, power becomes the motivation for salvation."¹

For these false teachers, atonement on the cross was not enough.

Joel Osteen preached at his Lakewood Church in Texas, "After the Resurrection, 'there still had to be a blood sacrifice for our sins. There still had to be a price paid. That is why Jesus 'presented His own blood in the high court of heav-

en as a sacrifice for all our sins, past, present, and future.' Joel Osteen asks, "Why didn't Jesus want Mary to touch him? I'll tell you what it was. Jesus had just risen from the grave, and He still had His Holy blood on Him. It was this blood He was going to use as a sacrifice for our sins."²

Osteen's interpretation does not align with the whole counsel of God. An eyewitness, the

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the World – The harmonious relationship between man, woman, and God is now possible again. Sin and death were defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Disobedience – God promised Adam and Eve that a descendant would smash the head of the enemy.

God Chose Abraham – God promised Abraham that through him all the peoples of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus fulfilled this promise, blessing all peoples through the power of the resurrection.

Suffering Savior – Isaiah promised a Savior would come to bear our punishment for our disobedience. The suffering had a purpose, to reconcile mankind to God, and the resurrection was the proof of the complete work.

Jeremiah – Despite the punishment of exile for breaking the covenant and worshiping false idols, God promised through Jeremiah a Savior would come and bring hope to the people. That Savior was born and executed as a punishment for mankind's sin, and he demonstrated power over death.

Suffering of Jesus – The Savior Jesus was convicted in an unjust trial and bore the punishment for our sin. The suffering was completed through the resurrection of Jesus.

¹ Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, MO: CreateSpace, 2017), 143.

² Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis: The 21st Century* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), Kindle edition.

apostle Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24 ESV). "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18 ESV). Paul wrote to the Galatians that the cross was his only reason to boast, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14 ESV).

If Osteen's metaphysical interpretation is correct, Jesus would not have offered to be ex-

amined more closely by his followers. "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39 ESV). He invited his disciple Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe" (John 20:27 ESV). Like Jesus had told his male disciples, Jesus told Mary that he would eventually leave again (John 13:33, 36; 20:17).³

Jesus was not in a hurry to return to heaven to make further atonement. As Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

³ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 1000.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The Sabbath, the Jewish religious day of rest, began at sundown Friday evening. It continued through to sundown Saturday evening. We have chosen to use the broader term “religious day of rest” for reproducibility as many languages use a transliterated word in the written text.

A woman would not have traveled at night or alone to the tomb. There would not have been adequate lighting to complete the preparation of the body for burial. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb as soon as she possibly could have, early Sunday morning. John may have assumed his readers were familiar with the other Gospels and eyewitness accounts of the women who went with Mary to the tomb as well (Luke 24:1; Mark 16:1). John 20:2 uses the plural pronoun “we” when Mary reported to the disciples.⁴ John chose to focus on Mary Magdalene’s account of the resurrection.

We have made explicit that the disciples who ran to see the empty tomb were Peter and John. “The disciple whom Jesus loved” was John’s way of referring to himself. Peter and John will be highlighted together in the next story from Acts 3. John will also be mentioned in the final story of the series from Revelation 20-21, **Joy Forever, Suffering Is Finished**. After the men left, Mary looked into the tomb again and saw the angels. The angels addressed her as “Woman.” In this context, it was a term of respect. This may not convey respect in modern cultures, so we have simply posed the question, “Why are you crying?”⁵ The storyteller may say, “Miss” or “Ma’am” to address Mary. The angels would not have addressed her as “Sister.”

“The Greek word that the NRSV translates as Lord means ‘master’ or ‘one who has authority over others.’ People used this word as a polite title when they spoke to an elder or someone in authority. Mary indicated that Jesus was in authority over her in some way. The Jews also used this same title to refer to God.”⁶

John 20:14 tells us that it was Jesus standing in the garden. Stylistically for building the plot, we have reversed the order of dialogue. A gardener is a caretaker of a garden or orchard. The tomb/cave was in a garden (John 19:41). We have included the NLT’s address, “Dear woman,” to show that Jesus demonstrated genuine concern for Mary (John 20:15). This supports a more accurate interpretation of John 20:17. The man, Jesus, called out Mary’s name, and she immediately recognized Jesus.

What did Jesus mean when he told Mary, “touch me not,” (KJV) in John 20:17? Extensive testing has shown that this verse has been interpreted that Jesus forbid Mary to touch him. Scholars agree that verse 17 is a challenging verse, but that Jesus told Mary to stop “holding on to or stop clinging” to him.⁷ The other women held on to Jesus’s feet in Matthew 28:9-10 and worshiped him. He wanted Mary to “let him go.” Jesus gave her an assignment to tell the rest of the disciples he had risen from the dead (John 20:17b-18).

John tells us that the disciples were behind locked doors, an important detail that makes Jesus’s appearance even more dramatic (John 20:19).

Luke 24:36-43 gives the details of Jesus’s sudden appearance among the believers. Jesus knew what Luke made explicit: they thought

⁴ Ronald Trail, *Exegetical Helps on John*, ed. Richard C. Blight (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 1982), 437.

⁵ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*. UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 609.

⁶ Helen Saint Kelly, John Anderson, and Joy Anderson, *Translator’s Notes on John: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2020), John 20:13.

⁷ Trail, *Exegetical Helps on John*, John 20:17.

he was a ghost. They thought he was a “spirit,” or, ‘ghost,’ in the sense of that portion of the personality which leaves the body at death and is believed to appear to the living in bodily likeness.”⁸ The storyteller should be careful to not use a term that could also mean evil spirit in the local language.

The concept of doubt is often expressed in an idiom in languages such as “double-minded” or “hearts filled with doubt” (NLT). The storyteller may use the appropriate idiom here.

Jesus invited those present to touch his body. “Feet and hands,” in the original language, describe not just the hands, but also the wrists and arm. We have chosen to use the traditional wording for reproducibility purposes.

“It is I, myself” (ESV, NASB) is more naturally worded as “You can see it’s really me” (NLT). Jesus asked for something to eat, proving he was not a ghost but in his physical body.

The example narrative returns to John 20:21 after the transitional statement of “Jesus explained many things that night.” Jesus issued the next steps for his followers—to preach the gospel, the forgiveness of sin. We have made explicit what forgiveness entails. It is to repent or to “turn away from their disobedience and turn and follow God through believing in me, Jesus.”

Background Information

Historical

Eyewitness

“Ancient Jewish men did not accept women as reliable witnesses for most legal purposes (their witness was limited, but less so, in Roman courts), and this cultural tendency may further move John and Peter to look for themselves.”⁹ Their testimony would now be admissible in a Jewish court.

Grave robbery

Grave robbery was a frequent crime in the first century. The emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) made it a capital offense and worthy of the death penalty to roll away the sealing stone and rob the grave.¹⁰

Biblical

Mary Magdalene

Mary was most likely from the village of Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was about seven miles from Capernaum where Peter lived, and Jesus frequently ministered there. Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9). All four Gospels mentioned Mary in the crucifixion/resurrection narratives.

Grave robbery

In John 20:6, Peter and John found the linen cloths used to wrap the body. Though not mentioned, the remaining spices that Nicodemus brought were there as well (John 19:39). Grave robbers would not have left such valuable items behind in the tomb.¹¹

⁸ Jannes Reiling and Jan Lodewyk Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 760.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, ed. *The Gospel According to John*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 636.

¹¹ Carson, *John*, 637.

Characters

Mary Magdalene

Peter

John

Angels

Jesus

Closest Followers

Key Terms

Lord/Master

"The Greek word that the NRSV translates as *Lord* means 'master' or 'one who has authority over others.' People used this word as a polite title when they spoke to an elder or someone in authority. Mary indicated that Jesus was in authority over her in some way. The Jews also used this same title to refer to God."¹²

Angels

If you have a Bible translation, your best option would be to use the word in the translation, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you don't have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original. An "angel" is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form, they are inferior to Jesus, and they often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for "angel" that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as "messenger of/from God," "envoy of God," or perhaps "ambassador of God." Be aware, though, that "prophet" also conveys those meanings. You might have to add "spirit (messenger from God)" to this description.

¹² Kelly, Anderson, and Anderson, *Notes on John*, 20:13.

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Story Guide 27

The Power of God's Spirit

Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:1-11; Acts 2

After Jesus rose from the dead, he spent the next forty days with his followers. He told them, "Go and make more followers of God through me in all the nations of the world. Teach them to obey everything that I have taught you." One day outside the city, Jesus explained, "God will send his Spirit to you. You will receive power when God's Spirit comes on you. With that power, you will be my witnesses, to tell everyone everywhere about me." As Jesus said that, he rose up into the sky to heaven and disappeared. The followers all watched him go and just stood there looking. Two angels appeared and said, "Why are you staring into the sky? Jesus has returned to heaven. One day he will return from heaven the way you saw him go."

They returned to Jerusalem and waited for God's Spirit that Jesus promised. Days later, there was a religious festival going on in the city. People from all over the world were living in the city. Many of the followers of Jesus were meeting together in one place. Something like a strong wind from heaven entered their meeting place. Something that looked like tongues of fire rested on each person. Immediately all the followers began praising God in languages they did not speak. These languages were clearly understood by the people who had lived in other countries!

When the crowds heard this, they were amazed that they were hearing their own language. Other people thought the followers were drunk! Peter spoke up. He said to the crowd, "No, they're not drunk!" Peter explained it was God's Spirit. Peter reminded them many things that the old prophets had said and concluded, "Jesus is the Promised Savior we have been waiting for! Jesus took on all of our disobedience, all of our sin. Now people can have a right relationship with God through believing in Jesus."

Many people heard these words and were touched deeply. They asked, "What do we need to do?" Peter answered, "You need to repent, to turn away from the ways that you've been disobeying God and turn and follow God through believing in Jesus. God

will forgive your sins. Then to show that you are followers of God through Jesus, you should be immersed in water—what we call baptism. God will give you his Spirit. God's Spirit is not just for you, but for your children and all those who follow God through Jesus in future generations."

Many people were happy to hear this good news. That day 3,000 people chose to repent and follow God through Jesus, and they were baptized. All the followers along with the new believers began to meet together. They prayed together and worshiped God together. They told stories about Jesus and studied God's word together. New believers were added to the community every day.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus rose from the dead, conquering sin and death to give all people the opportunity to have a right relationship with God. Jesus continued to teach his followers during the next forty days on earth. He prepared his followers for his departure from their presence. He also gave them a mission. The mission was to tell everyone everywhere the gospel. To accomplish this mission, Jesus promised that the Father God would send the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; Acts 1). God's Holy Spirit came to the believers of the early church. With this power of God's Spirit, the followers of Jesus began to spread the good news. The work of the Holy Spirit saturates the narrative of the New Testament.

Peter took the opportunity of the true manifestation of the Holy Spirit to speak to the religious

pilgrims. Peter quoted the prophet Joel and Psalms about David to point out that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. His message focused on the fact that Jesus was the long-awaited Promised Savior, the Christ (Acts 2:32-33).

Peter called for the pilgrims to repent, to turn away from their sins and follow God through believing in Jesus. The power of God's Holy Spirit pointed people to God's plan to redeem humankind through Jesus.

Today, the prosperity advocates and word of faith gurus peddle God's Holy Spirit for profit and fame. Their message is not redemption from sin and a right relationship with God. Their message is self-centered. Their call is to come be rich, have power, be victorious, to be winners. Reconciliation with God is not enough. The consistent message from them is that the Holy Spirit's power is to be harnessed for personal gain, for guaranteed healing, to fight demons and spiritual forces preventing success.

While the theology of the prosperity gospel is not monolithic, its teachings follow a general pattern. The movement's dogma blends Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking. Adherents insist that faith is a supernatural force that believers use to get whatever form of personal success they want, including physical health and material wealth. Faith is also claimed to be the medium through which the full power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed. A theology of the spoken word (or rhematology) is the basis for these notions. There is an implicit confidence in the power of "positive confession" in which faith enables what believers think and say to become actualized realities. Through the "force of faith" the "positive power" (God) is 'activated', and the negative (Satan) is confronted and negated.¹

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the World – The Holy Spirit was present at creation. God spoke, and everything was created.

God's Chosen King – Samuel went to the village of Bethlehem and anointed the youngest son of Jesse to be the next king of Israel. God's Spirit came on young David from that day forward.

Birth of the Savior – By the power of the Most High God—the Holy Spirit—the virgin Mary gave birth to the son of God, Jesus Christ.

The Temptation of Jesus – Right before Jesus began his ministry, God's Spirit led him to the wilderness to fast and pray.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician

Condemned – Philip, Peter, and John were ministering in the town of Samaria, and many Gentiles came to faith. Simon the Magician wanted to buy God's Spirit so he too could convey God's Spirit on new believers.

¹ Dan Lioy, "The Heart of the Prosperity Gospel: Self or the Savior?" September 1, 2017, https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/AJA19968167_21.



But the power of God's Holy Spirit helps the Christian to mature in faith, comforts believers, and enables followers to serve God through the church.² He empowers followers of Jesus to carry out the mission he gave us. God's Holy Spirit is not a mystical force that is to be used for profit. The mission is to take the good news of forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God to everyone everywhere.

² "Baptist Faith & Message 2000," Southern Baptist Convention, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction begins after the resurrection of Jesus in the previous story. Jesus cast vision for his followers to go and share the good news all over the world (Matthew 20:19-20). To accomplish this task, God would send God's Holy Spirit to them. We have chosen to use "God's Spirit" in this story because the term "holy" is not understood correctly in many international contexts. This word choice reinforces that the Spirit is from God only.

Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Acts 2:12). We did not name the location in the narrative as many people will be unfamiliar with the name. This is also the reason we did not name the geographic areas Jesus emphasized in Acts 1:8: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria.

We made explicit that Jesus rose into the sky to go to heaven. A destination may be helpful to some audiences so they can picture that Jesus was not just floating around but returned to his Father God in heaven. Some languages may use the same word for sky and heaven.

The two men who appeared in white were angels who looked like men (Acts 1:10). We have kept the rhetorical question, "Why are you staring into the sky?" as an interesting discourse feature. This can be omitted if it is confusing to the audience. One can simply state that Jesus returned to heaven.

We have kept "Jerusalem" in the story as the city has been referenced in other stories. The city is central to future stories in the set. The focus of this story is the coming of the Holy Spirit. To maintain that focus and the reproducibility, we did not include the selection of the new apostle, Matthias.

We did not mention the name of the Feast of Pentecost but kept it more general to serve a

wider audience. Acts 2:5 says "devout Jews from all nations" were there. We have generalized this as "from all over the world." It is mentioned earlier in the narrative chronologically to support that this was an important festival to the Jewish people.

Many of the followers of Jesus met together awaiting the promised Holy Spirit. This was not just the twelve, but also included several women and other men, 120 people in total. Scripture and the story are explicit that the sound came from heaven. This helps the audience understand that the Spirit came from God. It was not a spirit roaming the earth. The Scripture and the story are also careful to use the term "something like" to describe both the wind and the tongues of fire. Newman and Nida express this well:

What appeared to them were not tongues of fire, but "what looked like tongues of fire." This is Luke's way of reminding his readers that the natural object named (that is, tongue) is not intended to be an exact description, but only a likeness of that which actually appeared to the believers. The Greek expression "a tongue sat on each of them" is rendered variously in different translations, but it should be kept in mind that the text itself does not state how this was accomplished or where the tongues "sat" on each person.³

These "tongues" were an **understandable** language of the visitors who were in the city for the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11). There were eyewitnesses to attest that these were authentic, coherent languages spoken.

The essence of Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is the central theme of the example story. Peter masterfully weaved in prophesy from the Book of Joel and the Book of Psalms for the Jewish audience assembled at the festival in Jerusalem. For the sake of reproducibility for the audience of this story set, Peter's main point is used in the story. Peter explained how Jesus is the

³ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 34.

long-awaited Messiah or Christ. As in previous stories in this set, we have used "Promised Savior" for consistency.

The audience who heard Peter's words were deeply moved emotionally. In the original language, the phrase is literally "stabbed to the heart." The storyteller can use an appropriate term or idiom that reflects a deep emotional response such as their "hearts were cut."

Peter called for a twofold response to the remorse. First, we must repent. Repentance is unpacked in the example story for clarity—turn away from a willful life of disobedience and sin. Second, Peter was explicit that it is only through faith in Jesus that anyone can be right with God. This story set uses that phrase consistently and repetitively. It is to eliminate the belief that faith in a god or an ideology is enough to enter heaven upon death.

We have intentionally repeated that one must follow God through Jesus. Salvation occurs before baptism. The ceremony of baptism is described briefly as symbolic washing. It can also be described as a rite or a ceremony if that is more suitable for the local context. "What we call baptism" alludes to the fact that different religions and denominations have various baptismal practices. Just as Peter touched briefly on it, the story does as well. No doubt this part of the story will lead to further discussion on what baptism looks like and why it is an important step for the new believer.

The example story is explicit that the 3,000 joined the community through their repentance and faith in Jesus. They were not joining a social club. The story concludes with the activities the community embraced: meeting together, prayer, worship, study of the Scriptures, discussing what Jesus taught. Evangelism also hap-

pened as more people joined the community. The word "church" is first introduced in Acts 5:11.

Background Information

Historical

Throughout the laws of the covenant, the rituals of washing, cleansing, or purification are repeated. Exod 29:4, 17; Lev 1:9, 13; Num 8:7; Deut 21:6; 23:11.⁴ A mikveh was a bath that had built-in steps where one could walk down to perform the ritual cleansing and walk back out. These were in some private homes as well as public settings throughout Israel. More than 800 have been excavated throughout Israel.

Biblical

Because baptism was a sign of conversion to Judaism normally reserved for pagans, Peter's demand would offend his Jewish hearers and cost them respectability. He calls for a public, radical testimony of conversion, not a private, noncommittal request for salvation with no conditions. "In the name of Jesus Christ" distinguishes this sort of baptism, requiring faith in Christ, from other ancient baptisms. This phrase simply means that the person being baptized confesses Christ. It does not denote a formula said over the person being baptized, but rather indicates the confession of faith of the person receiving baptism.⁵

Pentecost

The Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, or the Feast of Harvest marked the fifty days or seven weeks of the barley harvest. The beginning of the harvest began right before Passover. It was one of three festivals that every male Israelite must observe each year (Deut 16:16).

⁴ Moisés Silva, James Dixon Douglas, and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., "Baptism" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 163.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 1973), Electronic edition.

Characters

Jesus

Peter

Closest followers

Community of the followers of Jesus/the believers

God's Spirit

Angels

Crowd

Key Terms

God's Spirit

God's Spirit, or the Holy Spirit of God, is the third person of the Trinity: the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew term *ruach* can mean "breath" or "wind," thus an unseen being. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit was present in creation. God's Spirit dwelled in individuals who were given a special task, such as kings or prophets. God's Spirit transforms and empowers people. In the New Testament, holy refers to something or someone that belongs to God, set apart. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, one who comes alongside and encourages. He is the essence of God and dwells in God's people.⁶

Baptism

Baptism is a symbolic purification or cleansing that takes place in a ritual, ceremony, or rite. It is often seen as an initiation into a community or religious group. Peter called for the crowd to repent from their disobedience/sin. In Acts 2, Peter called the Jewish audience to demonstrate a new life. He called them to follow God by recognizing Jesus as the Promised Savior. Peter said they must be baptized. Storytellers and story crafters need to think through the best term for "baptism." The story uses both the term and the meaning. Various faith groups have a form of baptism or even a water cere-



An ancient mikvah and cistern at Qumran.

mony. It should be clear that neither the ceremony nor the water achieves salvation. "The word itself is a Greek term, a transliteration of *baptizō*, meaning 'to dip (in water),' 'immerse,' 'sink,' or 'drench.'"⁷ Baptism is symbolic of the death of the believer to sin and the raising of the believer to live a new life by the power of the resurrected Christ.

Believers

After Pentecost, the people who followed Jesus were also called "believers." "Follower" or "believer" denotes a person who has chosen to believe in and follow Jesus exclusively.⁸

⁶ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 447.

⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, *John, Acts*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 236.

⁸ Stephen Stringer, *Storying Training 4 Trainers* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 65.

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Story Guide 28

Peter and John, Poor but Rich

Acts 3:1-12, 16, 19; 4:1-4, 21

After Jesus returned to heaven, he sent God's Holy Spirit to the followers, and they began to share with everyone everywhere the good news. This good news is that God forgives our disobedience when we turn away from wanting to sin and turn and follow God through faith in Jesus.

Peter and John went to God's house of worship, as usual, for the afternoon prayer. A man who had been lame his entire life was sitting at the gate, begging for money daily. That day he asked Peter and John for money.

Peter said to him, "I do not have any money, but I will give you what I do have. Because Jesus has the power to heal you, stand up and walk." Peter took the man's right hand and lifted him up. Immediately the man was healed! His feet and ankles became strong. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk. The man went into the house of worship with Peter and John, walking and jumping and praising God!

All the other people there at the house of worship recognized him and were amazed. They said to each other, "Is this the beggar always asking for money at the gate? Look at him walking and praising God? How can this be?"

Peter spoke to the crowd that had gathered. He said, "What is so surprising about this? And why do you look at us as though we were able to make this man walk because we have special powers or because we are so good before God? No, in Jesus's name and authority this man was healed. Now turn from your disobedience and sins and follow God through Jesus."

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the religious leaders came over to them. They were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching about Jesus. These leaders arrested Peter and John and put them in jail.

The next day, Peter and John were brought in front of the council of religious leaders. They were threatened with severe punishment if they continued to teach about Jesus, but they were released.

Many of the people who heard their message believed it and were praising God. The number of believers grew to more than five thousand men.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

After Jesus's resurrection and before he returned to heaven, he promised his followers that God's Spirit would come to them. With God's Spirit, they would have the power to go and tell everyone everywhere the good news. The message of good news is, Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead so that people may be reconciled to God. Anyone who repents, or turns away from wanting to disobey and sin, and follows God through faith in Jesus, will be forgiven. This was the mission Jesus gave to his first-century and subsequent followers: to tell the world this message and to obey all the things he had taught them (Matt 28:19-20).

Prosperity and word of faith advocates do not share the same mission as Jesus. Instead, these false teachers pervert this message of hope and reconciliation. They twist this God-centered redemption message into a self-focused, money-centric ideology. Their consistent message is not giving out of the abundance that God, the true owner, has given. Rather, it is framed "give ... so that." Give so that God must do ... what you want. Give a "seed" *in order to* reap a financial harvest. American prosperity preachers declare it to be a law to which God must submit. Robert Tilton calls it the "Law of Compensation." Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, the "Laws of Prosperity." "According to this law—purportedly based on Mark 10:30—Christians should give generously to others because when they do, God gives back more in return. This, in turn, leads to a cycle of ever-increasing prosperity."¹

Peter and John were in the inner circle of Jesus's friends and disciples (Mark 9:2-3; Matt 26:36-38). Even though they were in this inner circle, they did not have money to give the beggar (Acts 3:6). If Tilton, Copeland, and their fellow teachers' interpretation of Mark 10 is correct, why was Jesus's inner circle not rich? Why did they not have money to give away?

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Suffering Because of Obedience,

Jeremiah – The temple was a central element in the background of the Jewish faith and culture. It was at the temple where sacrifice and reconciliation took place. Peter, John, and the other followers continued to meet and worship God there. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice.

Seek the Kingdom of God – Peter and John were most likely in attendance when Jesus taught about storing up treasure in heaven. Peter and John did not have money to give to the beggar, but they healed the man on the authority of Jesus. Their treasure was their identity in Jesus.

The Cost of Following – Jesus warned his disciples that he would suffer. He warned them to prepare because they would suffer too if they chose to follow him. Peter and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter and John counted the cost of following Jesus. They suffered jail time and threats from the ruling council.

Called to Suffer – Jesus warned his disciples that if anyone would follow him, they must give up their own way. Anyone who wanted to save his life would lose it. Knowing the hardship that awaited, Peter declared to all present at the afternoon prayers how to find true life.

The Philippian Jailer – Paul and Silas, like Peter and John, shared their faith in Jesus in a public area. After healing a servant girl who suffered from an evil spirit, Paul and Silas were put in jail. Even under difficult circumstances, Paul declared boldly the good news about Jesus, and the jailer and his family believed.

Rather than riches, Peter and John were arrested and brought before the religious leaders who conspired to have Jesus crucified. The

¹ David W. Jones, "5 Errors of the Prosperity Gospel," *The Gospel Coalition*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-errors-of-the-prosperity-gospel/>.

council threatened them with further punishment (Acts 4). Tilton's error in using the Mark 10 reference is that Jesus was not referring to physical property (i.e., a tangible house). Jesus's promise was for the fellowship to be found in the greater Christian community.² Peter and John were beneficiaries of the promise of Mark 10, but not in financial assets (Acts 2:42-46).

Peter and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus's teaching. Jesus taught his disciples not to pursue material prosperity in this life, but instead to live simply as they followed Jesus (Matt 6:19-33; Luke 9:21-27, 57-62). Jesus warned his followers to expect suffering (Matt 10:38; 16:21-28). Peter gave the crippled man something far better than money.

African scholars Ehioghae and Olanrewaju rightly warn, "In essence, while prosperity gospel feeds the greed of its peddlers it emasculates the spirituality of believers. The utopian image presented by prosperity gospel is a mirage; many believers are worse off materially because of a faith that lacks sound biblical basis."³

² Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Mark 9-16* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2014), 114.

³ Efe M. Ehioghae and Joseph A. Olanrewaju, "A Theological Evaluation of the Utopian Image of Prosperity Gospel and the African Dilemma," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 20.8 (2015): 69-75.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The example narrative begins with a brief introduction that Jesus returned to heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit to his followers so they could fulfill the mission he gave them. This mission was to take the gospel to all people everywhere. We included the clarification of the good news for the audience.

The Greek in Acts 3:1 implies that Peter and John attended the afternoon prayer regularly at the temple.⁴ We used a consistent term for *temple*, “God’s house of worship,” in the example narrative. The word *temple* may have a different range of meaning for some audiences. A storyteller should not use the inaccurate term *church*.

The man at the gate was crippled and lame from birth. The storyteller should use a respectful and appropriate term for an individual who cannot walk or has great difficulty walking. The gate was the entrance to the temple complex. We do not go into the specific areas of the compound or the gate name in the example narrative for reasons of general audience reproducibility.

Silver and gold are not currencies carried in public today. The phrase *silver and gold* was a common phrase in the first century, but not for today’s modern audience. Money is the generic term used in the example narrative. The Greek phrase suggests that they had no money at all.⁵

When Peter addressed the man, he said, “In the name of Jesus, the Nazarene.” He thus spoke under the authority, name, and power of Jesus. We opted for a phrase closer to the original meaning that is more concrete.

Many in the broader audience may not know the correct meaning of Nazareth, the home village of Jesus.

Out of kindness, Peter extended a hand to help the man stand. The healing event did not require Peter’s assistance. Peter helped to steady the man and not to be rough with him.⁶

The details of the “man jumping, walking, and praising God” are important details to retain in the story. They are interesting details, and theologically significant as well. The first-century Jewish audience was aware the lame would leap like a deer when God brought salvation to Israel (Isa 35:6). Jesus healed a lame man as well. Scholars suggest that the healing took place at the home of Peter (Mark 1:29; 2:10–11). These theological links and commentary should be discussed in the small group discussion time, but not in the narrative itself to retain reproducibility.

The example narrative added dialogue to engage the audience and aid reproducibility. Dialogue is also a discourse feature in many languages in Africa and around the world. Dialogue helps the audience to visualize the scene. The indirect address was converted to a direct address and is now expressed in a more engaging conversational style.

Peter told the crowd it was not his and John’s godliness or piety that healed the man. *Godliness* has the potential to be misunderstood by the audience. We unpacked the word as “we are so good before God” or alternatively, “because we worship God so well.”

“Faith in the name of Jesus’ is just a way of referring to their trust in Jesus himself. You should make it clear that Jesus himself was the one who had made the man strong.”⁷ In the

⁴ *Translator’s Reference Translation of Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2002), Acts 3:1.

⁵ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 90.

⁶ David Blood and Steve Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Acts: Display* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2022), Acts 3:6.

⁷ Blood and Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Acts*, Acts 3:16.

story we used the word “belief” as the concrete expression of faith. See the Key Term section for more information.

For audience comprehension and reproducibility, Peter’s sermon to the crowd is considerably shortened to the essential call to repentance (Acts 3:17–21). We continue to unpack repentance throughout the story set, “turn away from sin/disobedience and follow God through Jesus.” Many people may say they follow “god.” We are explicit. It is only through Jesus that one can follow God.

We have used the consistent term “religious leaders” for the Levites (priests) and Sadducees. These specific terms are most often transliterated in local languages and perhaps not correctly understood by a general audience.

The religious leaders had the guards arrest Peter and John. The original language used an idiom to express their arrest, “threw (their) hands on them.” “It implies that the arrest was done forcefully.”⁸ If the story crafter’s language has a similar idiom, it may be used here.

The religious leaders “threatened” Peter and John. The original language suggests a stronger wording than “warned.”

Background Information

Historical

Temple Guard

The captain was a man from a leading priest’s family. He was second in power after the high priest. He oversaw the police force that maintained order in the temple complex area. They attempted to arrest Jesus in John 7:45 and were ultimately successful (Luke 22:52).⁹

Biblical

Prayer times

At the temple in the first century, there were two daily sacrifices, at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. Public prayer was also part of the sacrifice ceremony. At sunset, another prayer time was held.

Beautiful Gate

The temple complex had specific, named gates. “Although we do not know for sure, Beautiful Gate was probably one of the gates that was between the Gentiles’ Court (the outermost court/area of the temple complex/compound) and the Women’s Court, which is where Jews held public assemblies—most Bible scholars think it was a very ornate, bronze gate that was also called Nicanor Gate. Men and women Jews were allowed to enter the Women’s Court, but Gentiles were not allowed and were executed if they entered further than the Gentile’s Court.”¹⁰ See the diagram below of the temple complex.

Sadducees

The Sadducees were a wealthy, sophisticated, and well-educated Jewish party. They were only a few hundred in number, but they were very powerful religiously and politically in the Jewish community. They controlled the high priesthood, and they held the most seats in the Sanhedrin (that is, the Jewish Supreme Council or Court). Although it is uncertain, some Bible scholars think that the Sadducees were descendants of the priest Zadok who became high priest during Solomon’s reign (2 Sam 15:24–36; 1 Kgs 2:35; Eze 40:46; 44:15–16; 48.11). The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection, an afterlife, or an actual Christ or Messiah. They also did not believe that angels or other spirits existed. They believed that only the five books Moses wrote (also known as the Law or God’s Law(s)) had authority. And they did not accept the oral traditions or rules derived or taken from

⁸ TRT, Acts, Acts 4:3.

⁹ TRT, Acts, Acts 4:1.

¹⁰ TRT, Acts, Acts 3:2.

Moses's books. Their beliefs often put them at odds with the Pharisees (Acts 4.1.).¹¹

Characters

Peter

John

Crippled/healed man

House of Worship/Temple

Religious leaders

Crowd

Holy Spirit

Key Terms

House of Worship of God

Herod's Temple

"The temple erected by the exiles on their return from Babylon had stood for about five hundred years, when Herod the Great became king of Judea. The building had suffered considerably from natural decay as well as from the assaults of hostile armies, and Herod, desirous

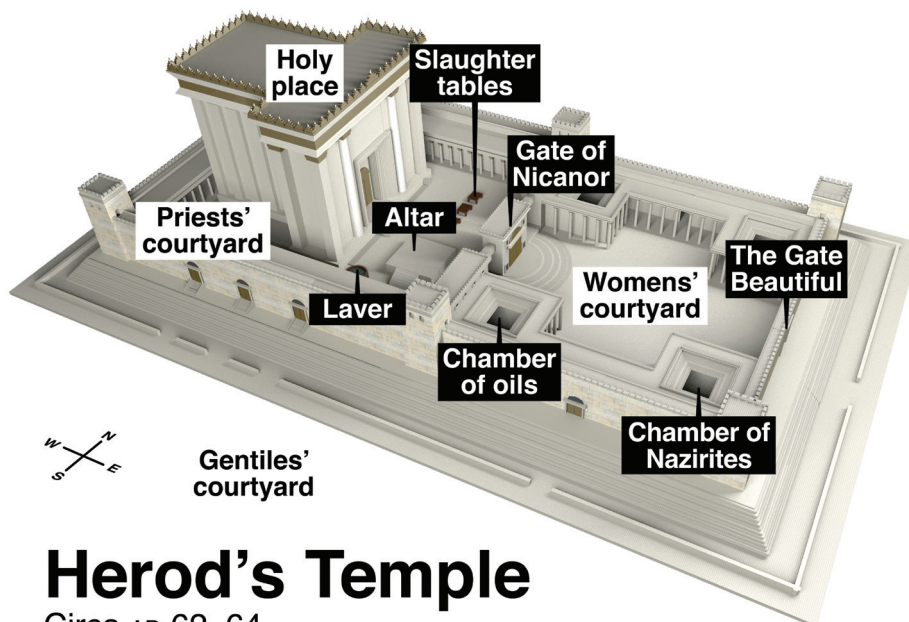
of gaining the favour of the Jews, proposed to rebuild it. This offer was accepted, and the work was begun (BC 18), and carried out at great labour and expense, and on a scale of surpassing splendour. The main part of the building was completed in ten years, but the erection of the outer courts and the embellishment of the whole were carried on during the entire period of our Lord's life on earth (John 2:16, 19-21), and the temple was completed only A.D. 65."¹²

Faith/belief/trust

To believe to the extent of complete trust and reliance—"to believe in, to have confidence in, to have faith in, to trust, faith, trust."¹³ Belief is the concrete expression of humankind responding to God.

Godliness, piety

In the original Greek language, *godliness* or *piety* is defined as the correct religious beliefs or attitude.



Herod's Temple

Circa AD 62-64

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¹¹ TRT, Acts, Acts 4:1.

¹² Matthew George Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), Electronic edition.

¹³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 375.

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Story Guide 29

Warning: The Lying Couple

Acts 4:32-5:11

Even though Peter and John were threatened by the religious leaders, they and the other followers of Jesus continued to tell everyone the good news about Jesus. The followers of Jesus shared their possessions with one another. They shared the same heart and mind. One man sold a field he owned and brought the money to the closest followers of Jesus to share with believers in need in the community.

There was also another man and his wife who sold a field and brought the money to benefit the community. Together, they decided to hold back part of the money from the sale of the field but claimed they were giving the full amount. The man came by himself to bring the money to the closest followers of Jesus. Peter asked him, "How could you do such a thing? Have you let Satan enter your heart? You have lied to God's Spirit. You kept back part of the money for yourself. It was your choice to sell the field. The money you made was yours to do what you wanted. You lied that it was the full amount of money. You lied to God, not just to us."

As soon as the man heard these words, he died. His dead body fell to the floor! Everyone who heard about the incident felt great fear. Some young men wrapped up the man's dead body in a cloth, took the body out, and buried him.

About three hours later, the man's wife came to Peter. She did not know what had happened to her husband. Peter asked her, "Was this the full amount of money you and your husband received for your field?" The woman answered, "Yes, that was the full amount." Peter said to her, "Why did you and your husband decide to lie and test God's Spirit? Did you think you would not suffer punishment?" Peter then said, "Look, these young men just returned from burying your dead husband. They will bury your dead body too." Immediately, the woman died and fell down. The young men carried her dead body out and buried her beside her husband. A great fear came over the community of the followers of Jesus, the church, as well as others who heard about what happened.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

After Peter and John were threatened by the high religious council, the followers of Jesus prayed for more boldness to share about Jesus. God answered this prayer. The followers of Jesus began to speak boldly. They continued to receive threats and persecution. Despite this, the early church exploded with rapid growth. Daily, new converts joined the community. The followers shared their possessions with those in need. Then an internal problem arose (Acts 4).

A married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, decided to sell their property and give part of the proceeds to the needy in the community of the followers of Jesus. Rather than be truthful about their gift to the community, they chose to misrepresent the value of their gift. Peter quickly pointed out that the amount of the gift was not the issue. The issue was deceit and greed. The couple lied when they pretended to give the full amount of money from the sale of their property. The couple lied not only to the community, but to God. The couple attempted to manipulate God for their own purposes.

This event should serve as a stern warning to those who elevate deceit and greed over the truth of the gospel. The Nigerian author, Femi Adeleye, rightly warns that we are living in strange times when greed, deceit, and manipulation are rife in today's church:

Strange times indeed! Times when one can be "born again" and not be a new creature in Christ. Times when one can claim to be "spiritual" and yet show no evidence of this in one's character, conduct, value system, relationships, or lifestyle. These are days when the gospel has come to be viewed as a short cut to the good things of life—a good car or a bigger house. This strange gospel promises entertainment without commitment, and those who embrace it are content to accumulate titles at the expense of a good testimony. For the love of celebration, we have shifted from the "great commission" to the "great entertainment". The attraction

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Capture of the Sacred Chest – The immoral young priests attempted to manipulate God by bringing the sacred chest to the battlefield without consulting God first. The lying couple sought distinction by giving a gift to manipulate their reputation among the community of believers. They lied to God as well as to the community.

Temptation of Jesus – Satan tried to tempt Jesus from his life of obedience to God. In the **Lying Couple** story, we see Satan again trying to quench the work of the Holy Spirit that filled the community of followers of Jesus.

Seek the Kingdom of God – The lying couple chose to withhold some of the proceeds from their land sale to receive praise for their generosity rather than trusting God with their future. They demonstrated that greed and deceit were a priority, not the kingdom. They did not trust God with their future financial needs.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician

Condemned – God issued a warning to the community that manipulation for profit, greed, deceit, or power had no place in his kingdom. Simon sought to buy the Holy Spirit and was condemned for it.

Warning: False Teachers – Peter warned that false teachers would come from inside the community of the followers of Jesus and attempt to deceive the congregation for their own personal gain. Peter was a witness to the very act from Ananias and Sapphira.

of this mixture of worldly religion and the gospel is so strong that believers are being seduced by it.¹

The tragic story of the lying couple is a warning to all. Greed, deceit, and manipulation have no place in the church. Those who preach prosperity and word of faith declarations are not only lying to their congregations but also lying to God.

¹ Femi Bitrus Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Bukuru, Nigeria: Africa Christian Textbooks; Carlisle, UK: HippoBooks Langham Publishing, 2011), 6-7.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The **Warning: The Lying Couple** story begins where the last story in the series ended. Peter and John had been arrested and held overnight for healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus. The next morning, they were brought before the council, the Sanhedrin. These religious leaders commanded and threatened Peter and John not to speak or teach about Jesus (Acts 4:1–21). Despite the threat, the followers of Jesus continued to speak boldly about Jesus and the word of God (Acts 4:31).

We have made explicit in the story that the followers shared the good news. We have also included the model of how people can respond to the good news and be right with God by repenting: “More and more people chose to repent and turn away from their disobedience [sin] and follow God through believing in Jesus.”

The followers shared their possessions. The followers shared the same heart and mind. The followers were together in agreement of thought and purpose. Their motives, feelings, desire, and thoughts were united. This concept of shared motives may be better expressed to the audience in a more culturally appropriate expression such as *brain, stomach, or liver*. That term may be used.²

We opted not to name Barnabas as the man who sold his field and brought the proceeds to the community. In this particular set of stories, he is not mentioned again. A general practice in oral storytelling is not to introduce new proper nouns where they will not be discussed in future stories. Barnabas played an important role in the early church. Storytellers can use Barnabas’s name if that would be beneficial to the audience.

The proper noun principle is also applied by referring to Ananias and Sapphira as simply “a

man and his wife.” If, however, in the local context, using their names would give more credibility to the story, then do so. The general rule of reproducibility or retelling the story by the audience is always encouraged.

We have used the term “field” for the property they sold. In Acts 5:3 ESV, Peter called the property “land.” The word “land” means a cultivated field. Family land or fields are a precious commodity to sell in Africa and around the world. The impact of the transaction of the field sold makes the story more interesting.

We made it clear in the story that the man and his wife acted together in selling the land and in the deception. This is slightly out of chronological order in the text (Acts 5:2). This order helps the audience understand immediately that both the husband and the wife were guilty of the deception. This will be important as the story unfolds. We want the story to be clear that the gifts brought were not just for the apostles but for the whole community.

Scripture is silent on why Ananias was by himself when he presented the funds to the apostles. The storyteller should not attempt to explain why. For the sake of simplicity and cross-cultural understanding, we have not used the idiom of laying the money at the feet of the apostles. This act symbolized that the apostles were to manage the money for the community. This was not a personal gift to Peter or any of the other closest followers of Jesus.

Peter then asked a rhetorical question, a question not really expecting an answer. We have clarified the question by adding, “How could you do such a thing?” It should be clear in the local language that Peter is rebuking Ananias.

The phrase “to fill” found in Acts 5:3 is figurative language. Translation commentators warn this is difficult to accurately translate in many languages. We have used the recommended phrase

² David Blood and Steve Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2022), Acts 4:32.

“Satan enter your heart.”³ The heart is commonly used as the center of emotions. Some people groups have different centers of emotions such as the liver or brain. Story crafters should use the appropriate term for their audience.

Peter continued with his summation of Ananias’s deception. The example story is clear that the issue is not keeping back part of the money. Ananias was under no obligation to give all the money. The sin was lying about holding part of the money back, but claiming it was the total amount. The text and the example story are clear. The couple’s deception was to God and the community of believers. Peter did not put a curse on Ananias or Sapphira. God made a swift judgment. Ananias heard Peter’s words, then died. It should be clear that the fall did not kill Ananias.

Louw and Nida explain a “great fear” as, “a state of severe distress, aroused by intense concern for impending pain, danger, evil.”⁴ This fear gripped those present and those who heard about the incident later. It was not a superstitious fear.

The young men immediately moved to bury Ananias’s body. Wrapping the body in a cloth or sheet would have been the normal way to bury a body.

Peter carefully asked the unknowing Sapphira about the money they received for the sale of the field. The example story consistently uses the word “field” for the land or property. The example story does not add extra commentary regarding a possible confession. When the woman continued with the lie, Peter rebuked her like he did her husband. Peter confronted the couple. God made the judgment.

Commentators agree that putting God’s Spirit to test was to see if they could escape punishment. We have made that explicit in the example story. Peter pointed out the young men who buried Sapphira’s **dead** husband. He was not buried alive. The woman died and fell down. We are consistent with the same wording used to describe her husband’s death.

Fear gripped the early church. We are making explicit that the church is not a building, but the community of followers.

Background Information

Historical

According to Jewish custom, when people died, their bodies were wrapped in cloth and placed in graves or tombs outside of the city walls, normally within twenty-four hours of their death.⁵

Biblical

Luke, the author of Acts, used an uncommon word for “kept back” (*nosphizō*). It is similar to the same word used in Joshua 7 and the sin of Achan. Joshua told the people of Israel not to take anything as personal plunder in the city of Jericho (Josh 6:18-19). Achan sinned by taking some of the devoted materials and hid them in his tent. He lied and deceived the community. He disobeyed God. Achan received the death penalty and was stoned to death by the community. His family too was struck down dead as a consequence.⁶

³ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series. (Dallas, TX: United Bible Societies, 1972), 116.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains v. 1*. 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 516.

⁵ *Translator’s Reference Translation of Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2002), Acts 5:6.

⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, *John, Acts*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 252.

Characters

Peter

The Lying Couple, Ananias and Sapphira

Closest followers

**Community of the followers of Jesus/
the believers**

God's Spirit

Satan

Key Terms

God's Spirit

God's Spirit, or the Holy Spirit of God, is the third person of the Trinity: the Father God, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew term *ruach* can mean "breath" or "wind," thus an unseen being. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit was present in creation. God's Spirit dwelled in individuals who were given a special task, such as kings or prophets. God's Spirit transforms and empowers people. In the New Testament, holy refers to something or someone that belongs to God, set apart. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, one who comes alongside and encourages. He is the essence of God and dwells in God's people.⁷

Church

The community of the followers of Jesus. In Acts 5 it is the first time the word "church" appears in the Book of Acts. The New Testament never refers to the church as a building. It can be a specific group of people or the worldwide community of the believers.

⁷ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 447.

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Story Guide 30

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned

Acts 8:1-24

The good news of Jesus spread! Many people chose to repent: they turned away from wanting to disobey and turned and followed God through faith in Jesus. When people accepted this good news, they were baptized—immersed in water to show they were followers of Jesus.

Just as Jesus had warned, people began to persecute his followers and made them suffer terribly! One man named Paul was going everywhere to destroy the church. All but the twelve closest followers of Jesus fled Jerusalem from the persecution. But the followers that left took the good news with them everywhere they went.

One follower, Philip, went to a town called Samaria. Samaria was the home of an ethnic group that the Israelites did not like at all. Through Philip, God cast out evil spirits and healed lame people even there! Philip shared the good news with them, and many people not only responded to the miracles, but they also repented: they turned away from their disobedience and sin and turned to God. They became followers of Jesus and were baptized. The whole town was filled with joy!

There was a man named Simon who practiced magic there. He amazed the local people with his powers. He boasted, "I am great and important!" The people said, "He is the Great One, the Power of God!" Simon believed the good news too and was baptized. Afterward, he followed Philip and watched him perform amazing miracles.

Back in Jerusalem, the twelve closest followers of Jesus heard these reports. They sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they found the Samaritan believers had not received God's Spirit. Peter and John put their hands on them and prayed for them. God's Spirit came to live in these new followers of Jesus.

Simon saw how God's Spirit was given when Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on the new believers. Simon said, "Let

me have this power too so when I lay hands on anyone, they may receive God's Spirit too! I'll pay you for it!"

Peter answered him, "May you and your money be destroyed in hell for thinking you can buy God's Spirit with money! Your heart is not right in God's sight. Repent and turn away from this evil plan of yours and pray to the Lord that he will forgive you for thinking this. Maybe he will forgive you." Then Peter said, "I see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are a slave of sin."

Simon begged Peter and John, "Pray for me that these terrible things will not happen to me!"

Peter and John continued to preach the good news among this ethnic group and as they traveled back to Jerusalem.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

After Jesus's resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the gospel began to spread through eyewitness testimonies. Persecution and suffering followed just as Jesus had warned (Matt 10:38; 16:21-28). As persecution spread, the followers of Jesus shared the gospel as they fled (Acts 8).

Philip, a man set apart by the church in Jerusalem to serve, traveled north to the area of Samaria (Acts 6:5-6, 8:4-40). Traditionally, Jews and Samaritans hated each other. But not Jesus. He spoke to Samaritans, highlighted them in stories, and cast a vision for ministry among them (John 4; Luke 10; Acts 1:8).¹ Philip shared clearly that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Philip healed the lame and the demon-possessed in Jesus's name. The townspeople were interested in his message and miracles.

These same townspeople were amazed at the sorcery and magic that Simon performed. Simon embraced his reputation as the "Great Power of God." Through tricks, incantations to the spirit world, and illusion, Simon demonstrated his power. He, too, became interested in the message and powers of Philip and was baptized (Acts 8:13). While shadowing Philip, Simon realized that God's power through Philip was truly genuine. Simon witnessed Peter and John lay hands on and pray for the new believers to receive God's Holy Spirit. Simon wanted that power and was ready to pay for it.

Scholars debate about whether Simon was a true convert. He declared faith and was baptized, yet he immediately sought power and prestige rather than repentance of his sin. Peter quickly rebuked Simon's sin and his slide toward syncretic magical practice.

The distilled message of the prosperity gospel and faith movement is not biblical, but syncretic. Their founder, E. W. Kenyon, began the spiral. "Kenyon's legacy in the Faith movement is not

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – Spirits/demons and agents of Satan are engaged in this world. Philip had to cast out evil spirits, and Simon the Magician interacted with them in Samaria.

Capture of the Sacred Chest – Israel turned away from God. To defeat their enemies on the battlefield, the elders sent out the ark of the covenant like a religious relic rather than consulting God. This amounted to little more than idolatry of an object rather than the abiding presence of God among his people. Simon sought to buy the Holy Spirit for his own profit and exploitation.

Elijah and the False Prophets – Israel's King Ahab disobeyed the command of marrying a foreign wife. As warned, his heart and that of the nation of Israel followed and turned away from God. A confrontation between God's prophet Elijah and the prophets of the false gods ensued. God demonstrated his power as Israel watched on Mount Carmel. King Ahab and the nation of Israel turned to idolatry to manipulate spiritual forces for their personal use. Likewise, Simon wanted to buy the Holy Spirit to sell to those eager to buy the services of the most powerful God.

Peter and John, Poor but Rich – Peter and John did not have money to give to the beggar at the gate at the temple. They were offered money for the ability to share the Holy Spirit which Peter sternly rebuked. Peter and John consistently demonstrated that their mission was not about money.

the genius of his biblical interpretation, but rather, his syncretism of cultic ideas. It is these ideas—the concepts syncretized from metaphysics, of healing, positive confession, and prosperity—that account for the success of the movement. The sad truth is that the cultic, not the biblical, elements of the Faith theology are the

¹ Brian Maiers, "Samaritans," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, John D. Barry et al., eds. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Electronic edition.

very elements that distinguish it the most, cause its amazing growth, and occupy center stage in the Faith movement."²

The pandemic growth of this movement is found in the adaptability, the syncretism in local culture. Manipulating God for personal benefit is the root of idolatry. This personal benefit most often comes in the form of money and fame. The emphasis on the necessity of the forgiveness of sin is forgotten.

Conrad Mbewe, a Baptist pastor in Zambia, addressed the issue of syncretism in an article he published:

The "Africanisation" of this religious junk is primarily in the way it has been made to appeal to African spirituality. The pastor is the modern witchdoctor calling all and sundry to come to him for "deliverance." Just as the witchdoctor appealed to us by inviting us to see him for spiritual protection or when we were struggling with bad luck, childlessness, joblessness, illness, failure to attract a suitor for marriage or to rise in a job or get a contract, etc., these pastors do precisely the same thing. So-called prophetic utterances are made which explain why all this is happening, holy water or oil is prayed over and dispensed, and some money is extracted from the persons seeking help. Thus their churches attract thousands of people who are there for purely selfish reasons. The motivating factor is not reconciliation with God through Christ but rather "deliverance" from perceived evil and to be blessed through the supernatural powers that "the man of God" possesses. Let's face it: this is our African traditional religions coming into the church through the back door. The result of

this phenomenon of personal-to-holder churches has been the selective nature of church discipline. You do not discipline a "Sangoma" (i.e., witchdoctor)—or a chief!³

Polhill recognizes, "Miracles can assist faith but never can be a substitute for it. When the miraculous assumes priority, it can actually become a hindrance to faith."⁴ Like Mbewe, Philip, Peter, and John, may we clearly proclaim the true gospel of Jesus Christ, repentance of sin, and dependence on him alone for salvation.

² Dan R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, upd. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 2011), Kindle Edition.

³ Conrad Mbewe, "Nigerian Religious Junk!" *A Letter from Kabwata*, February 20, 2011, <http://www.conradmbewe.com/2011/02/nigerian-religious-junk.html>.

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary v. 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 215.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The example narrative begins with a brief introduction of the overall advancement of the kingdom of God. We have unpacked the definitions of “repentance” and “baptism.” These terms will appear later in the narrative and are essential for audience comprehension.

The theme of suffering links previous stories. It is intentional to show the reality and fulfillment of Jesus’s warnings. Note the subtle introduction of Paul. Future stories will highlight Paul in this panorama. We have opted to use Paul’s name in Greek rather than the Hebrew, Saul, for the sake of consistency with upcoming stories. Greek was the language of the Roman Empire.

Naming Philip was important to the story line. This differentiates him from the apostles Peter and John. Tradition calls this Philip a deacon or evangelist. His designation as a follower is biblical and important to the storyline. This is not Philip the apostle.

Luke’s original audience would have immediately known that the Jews and the Samaritans had a strained relationship and hated one another. We have made this implicit concept explicit. See the Background Information section for further information.

The example narrative highlights the difference between Philip and Simon. God healed the lame and drove out the demons. We have made it explicit that people responded not just to miracles but also to the gospel that Philip proclaimed (Acts 8:12). Great joy only comes to the city when the gospel, the forgiveness of sin, comes.

Simon was a practicing magician. Use the appropriate term in the local language that the audience will readily understand. Simon’s power

was not derived from God despite the community’s claims. We have made this sequence a dialogue to engage the audience and increase reproducibility. It reinforces Simon’s attitude of bragging. This bragging was continuous, ongoing boasting.

The words the Samaritans used to describe Simon, “the Great One, the Power of God” is a complicated phrase to understand in the original language.⁵ There is scholarly debate if people thought he was a manifestation of God.

In the example narrative, we are careful not to add commentary on Simon’s motives for baptism. It becomes apparent later in the story.

We do not add commentary to explain why the apostles sent Peter and John to Samaria. Extra commentary and teaching limit the reproducibility of a narrative. These details are best discussed during the application/devotion time.

Good storytellers will pay attention to the use of pronouns in the story. Acts 8:9-15 has multiple characters interacting: the apostles as a group, Peter, John, the Samaritans, Philip, and Simon. For example, in the example narrative we said, “Peter and John put their hands on the Samaritan believers.”

We have made explicit that “to receive God’s Spirit” is for God’s Spirit to live in a believer. God’s Spirit is not an occasional visitor. It is widely accepted that Peter and John placed their hands on the heads of the Samaritans. The story crafter should use clear language that it was an appropriate, reverent blessing. It should not be misconstrued as anything unholy, sexual in nature. It was a blessing that signified that the Samaritans once thought of as outsiders are now welcomed into the community of Christ followers. This was a lesson for Peter, John, and Philip too (Luke 9:52-55).⁶

⁵ *Translator’s Reference Translation of Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2002), Acts 8:10.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 170.

Again, we worded the example narrative to contrast Peter, John, and Simon. Peter and John laid hands on the new believers, the ones who had repented and turned and followed God through faith in Jesus. Simon wanted this ability to transmit the Holy Spirit to anyone, regardless of their spiritual condition. Scholars agree Simon wanted this power to sell people the Holy Spirit, thus Peter's strong response.⁷

The example narrative uses strong language for Peter's rebuke and best reflects the original language. Translator's Reference Translation of Acts recommends, "go to destruction/hell" is very strong and should not be watered down in a translation."

Story crafters should note that Peter was issuing a strong warning and **not** a curse. Use appropriate language to reflect the difference. God's gift is God's Holy Spirit, and we have made that explicit in the narrative to avoid confusion.

Peter told Simon his heart was not right or he was not thinking correctly and honestly. For the Jewish people, the heart was the center of their emotions. Use the culturally-appropriate term if the audience uses a different term to identify the center of their emotions.

Peter called Simon to repent, or regret and turn away from his sin. We unpacked this key term again in this dialogue. Peter said, "maybe or perhaps" God will forgive you. The story crafter should be careful that word choice does not reflect any doubt about God's **ability** to forgive, rather his willingness to forgive based on Simon's sincerity.

We have unpacked the phrase "gall of bitterness" (KJV, ESV, NASB) as "bitter jealousy" to

tell how Simon was envious of Peter and John. A "slave to sin" is one who cannot stop sinning. "Prisoner" and "captive" are other figurative words that paint the picture of being bound, to express his inability to stop his sinful behavior. Both phrases suggest that Simon did not truly repent at the time of his confession of faith in Jesus.⁸

Simon pleaded with or begged Peter and John to pray for him that the warning would not happen. The biblical text does not tell us if Peter and John prayed for Simon as requested. While many scholars think that they did, Scripture does not record it.⁹ For this reason, we did not put this in the example narrative.

The conclusion of the story tells us that Peter and John returned to Jerusalem and shared the good news of Jesus in other Samaritan villages along the way.

Background Information

Historical

Samaritans

This people group claimed to be descendants of Abraham through the lineage of Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim. They claimed to be true followers of God, but they accepted as Scripture only the Torah, the books of Moses. They did not accept the writings of the prophets. From the Jewish perspective, they were seen as "half-breeds" who descended from the exiles who returned from Assyria and had intermarried with Gentiles, non-Jews. The Samaritans did not worship or bring sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem but had their own temple in their area.¹⁰ It is well documented that Jews would not enter their villages as they

⁷ David Blood and Steve Christensen, *Translator's Notes on Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2022), Acts 8:19b.

⁸ Arnold, *John, Acts*, 283.

⁹ Blood, Christensen, *Translator's Notes*.

¹⁰ Clinton E. Arnold, *John, Acts*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 236.

traveled in Israel. They would take a longer route to avoid a Samaritan village.

Magicians

Magicians were prominent in antiquity across cultures and people groups. They bought magic formulas and incantations from others as standard practice.¹¹

Great Power

In both first-century Jewish and Samaritan culture, "Great Power of God" was their way of saying Simon was a "Great Angel."¹²

Biblical

Prayer/Laying of hands

In the initiation process of new members of the Sanhedrin, other council members would lay hands on them in prayer.¹³ Jacob demonstrated this as he blessed Joseph's sons (Gen 48:13-20). God instructed the priests to lay hands on the animals that were sacrificed in purification offerings (Lev 1:4).

Characters

Peter

John

Philip

Simon

God's Holy Spirit

Key Terms

Repent

To turn away or regret your sins and turn from them to find forgiveness and reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38).

God's Spirit

God's Spirit, or the Holy Spirit of God, is the third person of the Trinity: the Father God, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew term *ruach* can mean "breath" or "wind," thus an unseen being. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit was present in creation. God's Spirit dwelled in individuals who were given a special task, such as kings or prophets. God's Spirit transforms and empowers people. In the New Testament, *holy* refers to something or someone that belongs to God, set apart. The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, one who comes alongside and encourages. He is the essence of God and dwells in God's people.¹⁴

Baptism

Baptism is a symbolic purification or cleansing that takes place in a ritual, ceremony, or rite. It is often seen as an initiation into a community or religious group. Peter called for the crowd to repent from their disobedience/sin. In Acts 2, Peter called the Jewish audience to demonstrate a new life. He called them to follow God by recognizing Jesus as the Promised Savior. Peter said they must be baptized. Storytellers and story crafters need to think through the best term for "baptism." The story uses both the term and the meaning. Various faith groups have a form of baptism or even a water ceremony. It should be clear that neither the ceremony nor the water achieves salvation. "The word itself is a Greek term, a transliteration of *baptizō*, meaning 'to dip (in water),' 'immerse,' 'sink,' or 'drench.'¹⁵ Baptism is symbolic of the death of the believer to sin and the raising of the believer to live a new life by the power of the resurrected Christ.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

¹² Arnold, *John, Acts*, 282.

¹³ Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 168.

¹⁴ James Dixon Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 447.

¹⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *John, Acts*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 236.

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Story Guide 31

Paul, Chosen to Suffer (Philippian Jailer)

Acts 8:3; 9:1-18; 16:5-34

The good news of Jesus spread! Just as Jesus had warned, persecution and suffering of his followers grew as well. A man named Paul was determined to destroy the church. The Israelite religious leaders gave him the authority to arrest the followers of Jesus. One day as he traveled, a great light from heaven shined all around. Paul fell to the ground. A voice from heaven said, "Paul, Paul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus said, "It is me, Jesus, whom you are making to suffer." When Paul opened his eyes, he was blind! Paul's traveling companions helped him to the city.

In a vision Jesus spoke to one of his followers in that city: "Ananias, go and heal Paul. He is the man I have chosen to serve me. He will take my message to the non-Jewish people and kings." But Ananias was afraid of Paul. Jesus told him, "Paul will suffer greatly because he will tell people about me." Ananias obeyed and went to Paul. Paul was healed of the blindness, filled with God's Spirit, and then baptized.

From that point on, Paul preached boldly that Jesus was the Promised Savior on his missionary travels. On one journey he went with a follower of Jesus named Silas to a city called Philippi.

One day as Paul and Silas were going to the Jewish place of prayer, they met a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters. She followed Paul, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved." This went on day after day until Paul got so tired of it that he turned and said to the evil spirit within her, "I command you in the name and authority of Jesus to come out of her." The demon left her, but her masters were angry because they lost the money that she made for them by telling fortunes. They dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities at the marketplace. They shouted to the city officials, "They are teaching the people to do things that are against our customs." The crowd beat Paul and Silas with heavy sticks and threw them into prison. The jailer was ordered, "Make

sure they don't escape." So he put them into the inner prison cell and chained them between heavy blocks of wood.

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake! Even the prison foundation stones moved. All the doors flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights and ran to the inner prison cell. He fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They told him, "Believe in Jesus—repent and turn away from your disobedience and turn to faith in God through Jesus. He will save you from the punishment of your sins." They shared this good news about Jesus with the jailer and his household. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. The jailer fed them at his house and cleaned their wounds, and they rejoiced because they all believed in God.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

As the good news spread, so did persecution. Jesus warned his followers to be prepared to suffer. He warned them to pick up their cross daily to follow him (Matt 16:24–26). Paul the persecutor, a sincere seeker of God, sought to arrest the men and women who had chosen to follow God through faith in Jesus. Instead, Paul encountered Jesus. He was forever changed (Acts 9:2–5). God sent Ananias to pray for Paul. From the onset of his ministry and new calling, God warned Paul that his life of obedience would entail suffering.

Paul and his co-worker Silas delivered a slave girl from demon possession. She was a victim of human trafficking. The slave owners were not happy that she lost the ability to supposedly predict the future. The slave owners brought Paul and Silas before local officials where they were beaten and thrown into prison.

A prolific evangelical author and speaker, John Piper is outspoken in his disdain for the prosperity gospel and the word of faith movement as anti-biblical. As we mentioned in our notes for the **Joseph the Dreamer** story, Piper's top criterion to determine if someone's theology is prosperity in nature is whether their theology includes a robust doctrine of suffering.

Piper highlights Paul's teaching in his warning: Look out for the absence of a serious doctrine of the biblical necessity and normalcy of suffering—the absence of a doctrine of suffering. As Paul went through the churches, he said that basic discipleship was to teach that you must enter the kingdom through many tribulations (Acts 14:21). Is this basic doctrinal teaching in the church? Tribulations are necessary, and there are many, and you must walk through them.¹

Prosperity and word of faith teachers around the world peddle a false gospel that says you are outside the will of God when you experience suffering. "Gospelpreneurs" gain billions of dollars from the sale of books, anointing oils, seminars, special prayer blessings, spirit exorcisms, and more. Their creativity to bilk their congregations appears endless.

Note the contrast of prosperity teaching and Paul and Silas's response to abuse. One example is Joel Osteen's counsel, "Be positive toward yourself. I am blessed; I am prosperous; I am healthy; I am continually growing wiser. I am excelling in my career; God is helping me succeed."²

As obedient servants, Paul and Silas suffered physical beatings and imprisonment and were confined by wooden stocks on their feet. Scripture records that their response was one of prayer and worship to God in the depth of the Philippian prison at midnight (Acts 16:22–26). Their response was not a positive confession of themselves but an appeal and praise to God alone.

Kenneth Mbugua, a Kenyan senior pastor, reminds us, "The claim of the prosperity preachers that it is never God's will for us to suffer is repeatedly contradicted by the Bible. We must not allow people to be driven to fear and doubt by suffering because their preachers have not equipped them to make sense of it. Christians do not need to fear suffering not only because it will end, but because God is sovereign over it and uses it to bless his children."³

¹ John Piper, "Six Keys to Detecting the Prosperity Gospel," *DesiringGod*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/six-keys-to-detecting-the-prosperity-gospel>.

² Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (New York: Howard Books, 2009), 118, 130.

³ Michael Otieno et al., *PROSPERITY? Seeking the True Gospel* (The Gospel Coalition, Nairobi, Kenya: ACTS 2015), 76.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Joseph the Dreamer/Servant Leader – Joseph was the favored son of Isaac and great-grandson of Abraham. He had a bright future until his circumstances changed. He remained faithful to God while suffering for decades. Paul too had a bright future as a Pharisee in a good family with a bright future.

Suffering Because of Obedience, Jeremiah – While Jeremiah walked in obedience to God and declared the need to repent or else suffer the exile, he was abused, beaten, and put in stocks. Paul and Silas—even while obedient to the message God had given them—suffered abuse, beatings, and being put in stocks.

Leave Everything (All Abandoned) – Paul was a young Pharisee who studied under an important teacher. He had a promising future. He met Jesus on the road to Damascus and gave up an easy life to serve and obey God. He left an honorable profession for an uncertain future that promised suffering.

The Suffering of Jesus (crucifixion) – Paul’s story reveals a life of suffering in his obedience to Jesus. Jesus chose to suffer to redeem humankind to God. Paul wrote later in his letters about identifying with Jesus in our suffering (Phil 3:10; Rom 8:17).

Peter and John, Poor but Rich – Peter healed the lame man in Jesus’s name and authority. Paul said the same thing to the fortune-telling spirit in the slave girl. Peter, John, Paul, and Silas were all persecuted and put in jail while they served in obedience to God.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician

Condemned – Paul was introduced in the beginning of this story as part of the persecution that led to the followers of Jesus leaving Jerusalem. **Paul, Chosen to Suffer**, picks up on that persecution scene as he was actively seeking men and women to arrest.

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering – Paul wrote one of his disciples, Timothy, to warn him that suffering is inevitable for a follower of Jesus. Paul encouraged Timothy to be content in the suffering.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The example narrative combines the story of Paul's conversion with the Philippian jailer's story. Normally each of these Scripture passages would be their own independent story. These passages complement each other as the combined story chronicles Paul's radical transformation from persecutor on the road to Damascus to persecuted in Philippi. Because both passages are rich in interesting narrative, it helps the audience to retain and retell the story.

A short introduction of the ongoing persecution links this story to the previous story of Simon the magician. Many believers fled Jerusalem due to the persecution and took the gospel with them.

We have opted to use Paul's name in Greek rather than the Hebrew, Saul, for the sake of consistency of the stories in this set. Traditionally it is taught that God changed Saul's name to Paul when he called him and gave Paul his mission. Jesus addressed him as Saul throughout Acts 9. When God spoke to Ananias, he said, "Go, pray, heal Saul of his blindness" (Acts 9:11). Dual names were common during the first century. Greek was the language of the Roman Empire or the language of wider communication. As Paul traveled on his missionary journeys in different countries and languages, he chose to use Paul (Acts 9:13).

Paul went to the high priest for authority to arrest the followers of Jesus. We use the consistent term "religious leaders" that we have been using in this story set. We did not include that Paul was on the road to Damascus, Syria. The general rule of orality is that more than three new proper nouns will limit a story's reproducibility by the audience.

An intense light from heaven suddenly flashed, shined, or blazed around Paul. It should be explicit in the story that it was from heaven—that the light came from God.⁴ Some languages may need to make that explicit and clarify that it did not come from a traditional god from their cultural folklore.

Paul fell to the ground. There is debate that Paul would have been on a horse or a donkey rather than walking. It was a 240-kilometer trip from Jerusalem to Damascus.⁵ This should not be included in the story crafter's version of the story, however. Adding teaching commentary limits reproducibility of the story, but it may be discussed in the small group time.

The voice Paul heard was from heaven as well and is explicit in the example narrative. Jesus called, "Saul, Saul." This was not out of anger but God's pattern when calling someone (e.g., Moses in Exod 3:4). The story in the local language should not suggest Jesus was angry by the repetition of Paul's name.

"Why do you persecute me?" is a rhetorical question, where the answer is known but does not expect an answer. Some languages may not use rhetorical questions, so it may be reworded to fit the local context. In this context, "persecute" and "suffer" are the same. We chose "to suffer" to be explicit with the theme that is woven throughout this set of stories. There is a bond between Jesus and his followers, and thus Jesus is being persecuted along with his bride the church (Luke 10:16).

Paul's question, "Who are you Lord (or Sir)?" uses the appropriate wording to address a deity. Lord is not LORD/Master here. It is not a Christological confession.⁶ Paul asked a sincere question. Luke used this formula later in Acts when

⁴ David Blood and Steve Christensen, *Translator's Notes on Acts: Display* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2022), Acts 9:3.

⁵ *Translator's Reference Translation of Acts: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2002), Acts 9:3.

⁶ Belinda Cheng and Robert Stutzman, *An Exegetical Summary of Acts 1-14*, Exegetical Summaries (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2017), 262.

the question was asked by earnest seekers (Acts 10:4; 22:8; 26:15).

Acts 9:5 says, "a voice said." The example narrative makes it explicit that "Jesus said." Barnabas will later tell the apostles that Paul had an encounter with the Lord/Jesus on the road (Acts 9:27).

The example narrative focuses on Paul's experience, but it does mention his traveling companions who helped him the rest of the short distance to the city of Damascus.

We introduced the character Ananias, but to maintain reproducibility, we did not include the names of the street where Judas lived (Strait Street) or Paul's hometown (Tarsus).

"I have chosen him to serve me" translates to "he is to me a vessel/instrument of choice." The phrase "vessel/instrument of choice" is merely a Jewish way of saying "(someone) chose a vessel/instrument"; while "vessel/instrument," when applied to a person, is equivalent in meaning to "someone who serves (someone else)." Finally, "he is to me" defines both who chooses ("to me") and who is chosen ("he"): that is, "I have chosen him (to serve me)."⁷

Ananias's concern was justified because he would have been a target of Paul's mission to arrest and persecute followers of Jesus. Acts 9:17 says the Lord Jesus appeared to Ananias in a vision, and it is explicit in the example narrative.

We have unpacked the term Gentiles as "non-Jewish" people for a clear description for the audience.

Paul will "suffer for the sake of my name" or "I, myself, me (Jesus)" for obediently telling people that Jesus is the Messiah/Promised Savior. This is explicit in the story to support the ongoing theme in this series.

The rapid series of events of Paul's healing, salvation, and baptism are crafted as a concluding statement. We have made it explicit that Paul's baptism followed the Holy Spirit's arrival in his life.

The example narrative then transitions through Paul's many years of study, service, and proclamation that God used to prepare him for his missionary journeys. Paul's co-worker, Silas, is introduced as well as the city where they went, Philippi. These two new proper nouns accentuate the authenticity to the narrative (Acts 16).

Paul and Silas encountered a fortune-telling slave girl who immediately identified their mission. We have made explicit that her powers came from an evil spirit. The story crafter should use the appropriate term. In some cultures, throughout Africa and around the world, some spirits are judged to perform "helpful" duties. We are making it explicit that any spirit apart from God's Holy Spirit is an evil spirit. It is evil that a child was a victim of human trafficking and exploited for the profit of her masters.

The Greek words for "followed and shouting" demonstrate this was an ongoing action (Acts 16:18). Paul used the same command as others who had healed illnesses, "in the name, in the power, in the authority of Jesus" (Acts 4).

Paul and Silas were dragged to the marketplace, which was the public square where public court was held by the local Roman magistrates, city officials. Story crafters should use the appropriate term for their audience. If marketplace only means a place to buy and sell goods, then a public court area is more accurate to the original meaning.

Paul and Silas were beaten with rods, cane, or a heavy stick or perhaps a whip to inflict much pain. They were "thrown" into prison or handled roughly with no concern of their comfort. Story

⁷ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 191.

crafters should not use a verb that means only thrown into the air.

Putting people in stocks is a harsh form of punishment. We do not use the term “stocks” as the audience may not readily understand the term but instead use descriptive language to unpack it. The prisoner’s legs were stretched and inserted through holes in a large piece of wood.

Some languages may not have a word for earthquake, so descriptive language such as “the ground shook very much” is acceptable. For a more descriptive image, we have made it explicit in the narrative that the prison foundation stones moved.

Scripture does not tell how Paul knew the jailer was about to kill himself. Storytellers should refrain from providing information about how Paul knew.

The jailer called for lights to be brought. It would have required many to search the prison to verify no prisoners escaped. The jailer “fell down” in a humble and respectful posture, not because he tripped. Some languages have an idiom or different submissive posture which may be considered here. We included he was trembling as he was no doubt overwhelmed by all the supernatural events that happened and who Paul and Silas truly were.

In the example narrative, we have explained repentance, regret, turning to God through faith in Jesus. This phrase “through faith in Jesus” is repeated often in this story set. Faith is prevalent throughout Africa and around the world. We want to be clear that saving faith is found only through Jesus. Earnest faith in false religions does not reconcile anyone to the perfect and Holy God.

We have unpacked “save.” It raises the question, “Saved from what?” Through Jesus we are saved

from the punishment of our sins (Rom 6:23; John 3:16-18).

The jailer’s household responded to the gospel presentation (Acts 16:32). A household included a family, perhaps servants, anyone who lived there.

Background Information

Historical

Fortune telling

The priestess at the temple of the Greek god Apollo in the town of Delphi, Greece, was known as Pythoness and supposedly had the power to predict the future. The slave girl exhibited this same demonic power. The demon recognized Yahweh God as the Most High God.

Beaten with rods, sticks

This was a brutal punishment used by the Romans on non-Roman citizens. A judge was present to determine when the victim was sufficiently beaten. Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and should not have been punished in this manner (Acts 16:38).

Biblical

Arrest authority

“At that time, the Roman government had given the Jewish Council authority over the Jews living in foreign cities and the high priest was the head of the Jewish Council. For this reason, Saul went to the high priest to ask for authority over the persons whom he wanted to arrest.”⁸

Bright light

The light from heaven indicates the Shekinah, God’s presence (related to the concept of *yeqarah*, “glory”), as God often revealed his glory in the Old Testament.⁹

⁸ Cheng and Stutzman, *An Exegetical Summary of Acts 1-14*, 259.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Acts 9:3.



Blindness

“God sometimes struck people with blindness to stop them from an evil purpose or as a temporary measure to get their attention” (Gen 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:18-20, contrast 6:17).¹⁰

Jailer’s suicide

If prisoners escaped in the first century, the jailer was given the same punishment of the escaped prisoner (Acts 12:19). It is suggested that the jailer, rather than be tortured and killed, preferred to take his own life. Other scholars suggest that suicide was a form of military code of honor.

Characters

- Paul
- Ananias
- Silas
- Jailer

Slave girl Jesus

Key Terms Gentiles

Gentiles were non-Jewish, godless people, or pagans who did not follow the laws of Moses. Gentiles can also be used in reference to the “nations” (Luke 12:30).

Save/salvation

“To save” or “salvation” may refer either to rescuing from a physical danger (such as death or captivity to an enemy) or to rescuing from spiritual and eternal danger (captivity to sin and condemnation by God),¹¹ to be saved from the rightful punishment from God for sin through faith in God through Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Keener, *IVP Background*, Acts 9:8.

¹¹ Katharine Barnwell, Paul Dancy, and Anthony Pope, *Key Biblical Terms of the New Testament: An Aid for Bible Translators* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995).

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Story Guide 32

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering

2 Timothy 1:8; 2:3; 3:10-15; 4:3, 8

Paul continued his mission across the region of sharing the good news that Jesus was the Promised Savior. He worked with many different men and women over the years. On Paul's second trip in sharing the good news, he met a young man named Timothy. They worked together for many years. Paul even called Timothy his son. As a good spiritual father, Paul wrote Timothy letters to encourage him and remind him of the things that he taught him. Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy while Paul was in prison as a result of his faith in Jesus. He warned Timothy that he would suffer too.

This is some of what Paul wrote:

Dear, Timothy, never be ashamed to tell others about Jesus. Don't be ashamed of me either, even though I am in prison because I serve Jesus. Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Jesus, the Promised Savior.

You, Timothy, know my way of life—living according to the Scriptures. You know my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. You know how much persecution and suffering I have endured in all the different towns in the region.

Timothy, everyone who wants to live a life that pleases God through Jesus will suffer persecution. The false teachers will go from bad to worse. But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught, the word of God.

A time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound teachings. They will follow their own desires. People will look for teachers who will tell them what they want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after made-up stories.

But you, Timothy, endure suffering for God. Work at telling others the good news, and fully carry out the work God has given you.

Timothy, I give you these commands because my life and work for God are ending. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. God is keeping a reward for me in heaven because I have pleased and obeyed him. And God will reward every Christian who suffers because of obeying Jesus.

Greet our friends for me, come and see me before wintertime and bring my heavy coat. Grace be with you.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy while sitting in a Roman prison. His execution was imminent. This personal pastoral epistle encouraged Timothy, his co-worker and son in the faith, in his call to ministry. Paul advised him to confront false teaching. He also reminded Timothy to be prepared for the inevitable persecution and suffering he would face if he held fast to the true faith. This rich epistle continues to be a source of inspiration to the church today to share the gospel and the word of God accurately to the nations. The example crafted narrative is just one excerpt from Paul's teaching in 2 Timothy, not the entirety of the epistle.

This series of stories has endeavored to bring out the interwoven theme of suffering throughout the metanarrative of Scripture. Jesus warned his followers of it. He promised his presence amid suffering (Matt 28:20; Acts 9:24). The Book of Acts and the Epistles confirmed the suffering of Christians in their obedience and that they were joyful in it (Acts 5:41; 16:25; 2 Cor 12:10; Col 1:24; Rom 5:3).

The early church was keenly aware of this reality. "The word for 'witness' in the New Testament, *martus*, is the source of the English word *martyr*. Those who suffered and died for the cause of Christ were called martyrs because by their suffering they bore witness to Christ."¹

Yet today's prosperity and word of faith advocates maintain the opposite. Motivational, inspirational messages are packaged as "biblical." Their false gospel says you should expect blessings, not suffering. You should expect perfect health, not sickness or disease. In a *Financial Times Magazine* article, the reporter asked Joel Osteen,

How did he manage to keep sin and redemption out of a Christian message, I asked. "Look, I am a preacher's son so I'm an optimist," Osteen said after a pause.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Suffering Because of Obedience, Jeremiah – While Jeremiah walked in obedience to God and declared the need to repent or else suffer the exile, he was abused, beaten, and put in stocks. Paul and Timothy were abused and put in prison while being faithful (Acts 16:23; Heb 13:23). Even while obedient to the message God had given them, they suffered abuse, beatings, and being put in stocks.

Paul Chosen to Suffer (The Philippian Jailer)

– Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and his life changed. He joined the ranks of the persecuted as he put his faith completely in Jesus, the Promised Savior. Paul shared boldly this good news across the region. He mentored leaders like Timothy along the way.

Sufferings of Paul – Paul sent Timothy to Corinth, where he helped disciple the believers there. Timothy was a witness to the deception of the false teachers that Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians. It prepared Timothy for his future ministry. Paul wrote to encourage Timothy and remind him to remain faithful in difficulty and hold fast to God's word.

Warning: False Teachers – Peter warned the persecuted Gentile Christians of the prolific false teaching threatening their communities. Both apostles recognized the importance of reinforcing doctrine in the church.

Suffering is Finished! – There will be a new heaven and a new earth. Those who chose to follow God through Jesus will dwell together on the new earth. God will live among his people. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more suffering and no more false teachers.

¹ R. C. Sproul, "In Christ Our Suffering Is Not in Vain," *Ligonier*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/christ-our-suffering-not-vain>.



“Life already makes us feel guilty every day. If you keep laying shame on people, they get turned off.”

But how does telling people to downplay their consciences tally with the New Testament? Osteen smiled awkwardly. “I preach the gospel, but we are non-denominational,” he replied. “It is not my aim to dwell on technicalities. I want to help people sleep at night.”²

Paul wrote Timothy from a prison cell as a spiritual father to prepare him for the realities of his calling, for Christian adulthood. At the climax of this story, Paul wrote, “Everyone who wants to live a life that pleases God through Jesus will suffer persecution” (1 Tim 3:12). Compare Paul’s message to that of Osteen’s, “‘If God had a refrigerator,’ Osteen said, ‘your picture would be on it.’”³

² Edward Luce, “A Preacher for Trump’s America: Joel Osteen and the Prosperity Gospel,” *Financial Times Magazine*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>.

³ Luce, *Financial Times*.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The example narrative begins by connecting the story of **Paul, Chosen to Suffer** to his mentoring relationship with Timothy. It is important to have a strong introduction that sets the context for a story based on epistle passages. Timothy was with Paul in Corinth as well as in several other ministry locations. Note the consistent key terms in “the good news that Jesus is the Promised Savior.”

Paul first met Timothy while he was traveling through Lystra on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3). Scholars speculate that Paul and Timothy met on Paul’s first missionary journey, but Scripture does not state this.

“Timothy is mentioned often as being in Paul’s presence, for instance as the co-author of several epistles (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon), and just as often as being away from Paul on strategic trips (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10-11; 1 Thess 3:1-2; Phil 2:19-24).”⁴

Paul called Timothy “son” (2 Tim 1:2). Paul was not Timothy’s biological father. Story crafters should be sensitive to the wording for an appropriate relationship of a father-like figure. His warning to Timothy ties together the theme of suffering from the overall story set and the previous two Paul stories.

The phrase “in prison in him” has been unpacked “in prison because I serve Jesus.” It should be clear to the audience that Jesus Christ did not put Paul in prison and was not holding him somewhere.

Paul wrote, “suffer together,” or, “share in suffering,” in the sense of sharing in the suffering by the Christian community at large because of their faith in Jesus.

Paul used the term “soldier” or “warrior” in a metaphorical sense. Paul was not advocating violence, combat, or physical warfare. Story crafters should be sensitive to the wording if the audience would understand a form of violence through this metaphor. Paul’s reference to a soldier is in the context of one who takes orders and serves under difficult conditions with Jesus Christ as the commanding officer.

Paul reminded Timothy of a few things that characterized their service together, “my way of life.”⁵ These attributes of Paul contrast the normal prisoner as well as the false teachers that plagued the early church. We have included the points of right living that Paul expected from Timothy and other believers: faith, patience, love, endurance.

The example narrative again brings out persecution and suffering. We did not name the towns Antioch, Iconium, or Lystra—all located in modern-day Turkey. The modern audience may not be familiar with these historical towns, which could limit the retelling of the stories to their family and friends.

The repetitive device of using Timothy’s name is to give the audience a visual reminder of Paul writing a letter to his beloved co-worker. This reminds the audience of the context that allows the audience to visualize the scene. This imagery aids in the retelling of the story.

Paul made explicit that he was not singled out for persecution.⁶ Timothy and all devout followers were to expect persecution.

⁴ “The Next Faithful Step,” *Fuller Theological Seminary*, 2022, <https://www.fuller.edu/next-faithful-step/resources/paul-and-timothy>.

⁵ Henrietta Andrews, *Translator’s Notes on 2 Timothy: Display*, (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2003), 2 Tim 3:10.

⁶ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*. UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 231.

We have made the phrase “godly life” explicit as a life that pleases God (2 Tim 3:12). He is someone who submits himself to God and lives in a way that honors God.⁷

The “evil men” and “imposters” in 2 Tim 3:13 refer back to the false teachers. We use this consistent key term throughout the story set. Note, Paul does not elaborate on the behavior of the false teachers. Story crafters should not speculate on what this behavior was in their contextualized stories.

Paul contrasted Timothy to the false teachers. “Remain faithful” means “continue to believe what you have learned.” Timothy learned the “holy Scriptures” or “sacred writings.”

Paul warned that people will “no longer listen to,” meaning “to accept” or “tolerate.” The story crafter should use the phrase that is most appropriate for their audience. Paul uses a Greek phrase that people with “itching ears” (ESV, NIV) or “tickled ears” (NASB) have the desire to listen only to the things they enjoy. There is not a physical sensation in one’s ears. The story crafter may use an appropriate idiom for their local context.

In 2 Tim 4:4, “turn their ears from the truth” (NASB, NIV) is unpacked in the example narrative as “they will reject the truth.” Paul continued using the imagery of the ears as a figure of speech in the sense of willingness to listen or, in this instance, not listen. People will be inclined to listen to “myths, legends, made-up stories.” All cultures have traditional oral, written, or sung narratives. The story crafter is encouraged to use the word that best fits their context.

We have made explicit “endure suffering for God.” Paul’s message is not to bear hardships or suffer for the sake of suffering. “Endure suffer-

ing” is in the act of obedience or service to God. “Endure suffering is a theme that runs through this letter.”⁸

The term evangelist is not used in the example narrative, rather “work at telling others the good news.” It is the responsibility of all Christians to share the good news—not just those who have been formally ordained for church service.⁹

We have avoided Paul’s reference to being “poured out like a drink offering.” Drink offerings remain a part of African traditional religions today. There is a potential misunderstanding of Paul’s statement.

We retained Paul’s memorable conclusion “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race and I have remained faithful.” Faithful believers throughout Africa and around the world reference this concept as a desire to serve and die faithful in Christ.

In 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul described how his life of obedience would receive a “crown” in heaven. We have chosen the more general term “reward” as the word picture of a winning athlete’s prize may not communicate to the modern audience fully. This is not a crown that a king or queen might wear.¹⁰ This reward is not just for Paul, but for all faithful Christians. We have made this explicit in the example narrative.

The example narrative concludes with a traditional ending to a letter to remind the audience this was a personal letter from Paul to Timothy. Extending “greetings” is a daily courtesy across Africa. We include the interesting detail of Paul’s request that Timothy bring his coat. It alludes to Paul’s suffering and also to the practical opportunity for Timothy to be a good son to his dying spiritual father.

⁷ Andrews, *Notes on 2 Timothy*, 2 Tim 3:12.

⁸ Arichea and Hatton, *A Handbook to Timothy and to Titus*, 243.

⁹ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr. 1, *2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary v. 34 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992), 343.

¹⁰ Andrews, *Notes on 2 Timothy*, 2 Tim 4:8.

Background Information

Historical

Suffering of a soldier

Soldiers were not allowed to marry during their term of service. Soldiers were to be strictly devoted during their term of service. The term of service was 20+ years. Only half survived to retire.¹¹

Drink Offering

Israelites were instructed to pour out drink offerings to God (Ex. 29:40-41; 37:16) but not to other gods. "Ancient religions regularly poured out libations to the gods, usually wine but sometimes water or another substance. Paul is being poured out (see 2:7) as such a 'drink offering' to the true God, a willing offering on their behalf that joined their own sacrifice."¹²

Maternal descent of Judaism

The child of a Jewish mother is Jewish. Jewish lineage is passed down through the mother's line regardless of the father's lineage.¹³

Biblical

Crown

"Paul used another figure of speech from sports. During the time that Paul lived, an athlete who won a fight or a race or any other sports event received a crown made of leaves as a prize."¹⁴

Characters

Paul

Timothy

False Teachers

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 2 Tim 2:4.

¹² Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, Phil 2:1-18.

¹³ Freeman, Tzvi and Yehuda Shurpin, "Why is Jewishness Matrilineal? Maternal Descent in Judaism," *Chabad* 2020, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/601092/jewish/Why-Is-Jewishness-Matrilineal.htm.

¹⁴ Andrews, *Translator's Notes*, 2 Tim 4:8.

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Story Guide 33

Warning: Suffering and False Teachers

1 Peter 4:12-13; 2 Peter 2:1b-3, 19; 3:3-4, 9, 13, 17-18

After Peter returned from Samaria, where he dealt with Simon the Magician, he continued to be a leader of the early church. He traveled and shared the good news of Jesus, the Promised Savior, with people around the region. Near the end of his life, he wrote two letters that would circulate to the Christians living outside of Israel. Peter wanted to encourage them in their suffering of persecution, to warn them about false teachers and remind them that Jesus will return one day.

This is some of what Peter wrote to encourage those suffering because of their faith in Jesus:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering. Instead, be very glad—these trials make you partners with Jesus in his suffering. If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed. Praise God for the privilege of being called a Christian!

In Peter's second letter, he warned the followers:

Just like in our ancestor's days, there will be false teachers among you. They will teach lies about God while pretending to teach the truth. Many will follow their shameful ways. And because of these false teachers, people will say bad things about the way of truth, the Christian life. Those false teachers only want your money. They will profit by telling you lies. But their judgment and punishment from God are coming.

These false teachers promise freedom from God's laws—to live however you want—but these false teachers are really slaves of corruption.

Peter ended his last letter saying:

It is most important for you to understand what will happen in the last days before Jesus returns. People will laugh at you. The false teachers will say, "Jesus promised to come again. Where

is he?" No, God is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be lost but wants everyone to repent, to turn away from their sin and turn and follow God through Jesus. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and the new earth he has promised! There, all people will do only what is right.

Dear friends, you already know these things. Be very careful then, that evil, false teachers will not lead you astray with their false teachings. Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

Jesus called Peter to be his disciple early on in his ministry. The Gospel writers named Peter in some of the most important events of Jesus's ministry. Peter played a central role during the last week of Jesus's life. In the courtyard at Jesus's trial, Peter denied knowing him, but Jesus forgave him and restored him (Matt 26:69-75; John 21:15-19). Peter became a leader in the early church. Even in his position in the inner circle of Jesus, Peter was not exempt from persecution and suffering (Acts 5; 12:1-17).

As Peter was nearing the end of his life, he wanted to prepare the Christians living abroad for false teachers who infiltrated fellowships with corrupt, self-serving teachings (2 Pet 1:14). Peter warned of the false teachers that were inevitable. He also warned that Christians should not be surprised at the suffering and persecution that accompanies the life of a Christian. No follower is exempt, not even Peter, who was in the inner circle of Jesus.

Peter's words written to the leaders across Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) are just as relevant today. Persecution today ranges from cancel culture or insults in the West to executions found throughout Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. False teachers around the world teach wrongly that God owes you an easy life. As Peter pointed out, these false teachers were truly interested only in the money they could manage to make from an unsuspecting audience.

The false teachers of Peter's day promoted a lifestyle of freedom. Today's prosperity advocates promise freedom as well. The freedom they promise, however, in the form of success and money, is ultimately greed. There is little call to righteous living. There are few sermons in this theology dedicated to repentance of sin. The primary "sin" to be repented of in prosperity circles is not claiming all of your prosperity in Christ, not pronouncing, and therefore not activating God's promised blessings, not sowing that seed of faith that will lead to abundance. Peter warned the false teachers in the first-century church as well as those today of God's judgment.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Elijah and the False Prophets – The false prophets that Elijah confronted were the forerunners to false teachers during the days of the early church. Peter warned the church that these deceivers brought in self-serving heresies that led to destruction.

Called to Suffer – Jesus warned his followers to be prepared to pick up their cross daily, to be prepared to suffer if they followed him. Peter warned the early church to expect suffering as a normal part of the Christian life.

The Suffering of Jesus (crucifixion) – Peter wrote to the believers living abroad that the suffering they endured made them partners in Jesus's suffering when he was crucified. They could now identify with him in this painful persecution and fiery trials.

Peter and John, Poor but Rich – Peter healed the lame man in Jesus's name and authority of Jesus. Peter continued to grow in his knowledge of God's mission and calling on his life to share with both Jews and Gentiles.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician Condemned – Peter was first exposed to Gentiles being saved in Samaria. This prepared him to share the gospel with Cornelius and others (Acts 10:24-33; 15:7).

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering – Paul wrote one of his disciples, Timothy, to warn him that suffering is inevitable for a follower of Jesus. Peter in his last days on earth chose to send letters to Christian leaders living abroad. Peter encouraged them to remain faithful and not be surprised in this suffering.

Suffering is Finished! – Peter's fellow disciple, John, was imprisoned on an island for his faith in Jesus. While serving this sentence, John was shown a vision of the future when Jesus will return and the heavens and the earth will be new. Peter encouraged the church that Jesus will return, and he told of the new heavens and the new earth. Suffering will be finished as men and women will live righteously there.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The introduction reminds the audience that Peter had gone to Samaria to witness the conversion of Gentiles. We included the name of Simon the Magician, as he is a vivid character. This reminds the audience of the town/region, Samaria.

Most scholars agree that Peter wrote 1 Peter from “Babylon,” a code name for the city of Rome (1 Pet 5:13).¹ For reasons of reproducibility, we do not include this extra information in the example narrative. If local-language written Bible translations use the city name Rome, then story crafters may include it in their narratives. Some scholars speculate Peter was in prison, but Scripture does not mention it. His location is not included in the example narrative.

Peter wrote to Christians living in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Not all audiences are familiar with this geographical area, so the example narrative refers to this area as “outside of Israel.” God sent Peter to the home of a Roman Gentile, Cornelius. Peter led Cornelius to faith in God through Jesus (Acts 10:1–35). Cornelius lived in the coastal city of Caesarea, where the Roman governors lived.² God prepared Peter for his cross-cultural ministry there that would lead to the eventual writing to the new Christians outside of Israel (Gal 2:11). Peter fulfilled Jesus’s command of taking the gospel to Judea, Samaria, and beyond (Acts 1:8).

The introduction of the example narrative also tells the audience what the story focuses on. Repetition is a discourse feature in orality culture and helps the audience share the story in the community.

We have included the phrase “to encourage those suffering because of their faith in Jesus” to clarify that suffering comes from their obedience to Jesus. Not all suffering experienced by Christians is virtuous. God does not reward us for suffering that we experience for our wrongdoing.

The example narrative begins with “Dear Friends,” a more modern expression of “beloved” or “loved ones,” a common greeting of New Testament letters. This does not mean that Peter knew each person who read or heard the letter.³ Story crafters can use the most appropriate greeting that expresses fraternal affection for their target audience.

“The word ‘surprised’ here refers to the shock a person feels at unexpected bad news. Peter was saying that believers should expect to suffer.”⁴ Peter used a metaphor, “fiery trial.” We chose to use the NIV translation, “painful trial,” a generally more inclusive term. Persecution and suffering take many forms, and we did not want the audience to think of only fire-related abuse.

Peter wrote that the trials “make you partner with Jesus in his suffering,” or experience Jesus’s suffering, referencing the persecution of Christians by evil people.⁵ Story crafters need to be careful not to lead the audience to think Jesus needed additional help in the atonement on the cross.

In the example narrative, we rely on the NIV translation as clearly stated: “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed.” Many languages have idiomatic phrases that express shame. The story crafter may use that phrase if it is appropriate for the audience. For the sake of clarity, we have made the phrase “bear his name” or “called by his name” more explicit as “to be called a Christian.”

¹ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 202.

² Clinton E. Arnold, *John, Acts*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary v. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 301.

³ Helen Saint Kelly, *Translator’s Notes on 1 Peter: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2018), 1 Pet 4:12.

⁴ Kelly, *Translator’s Notes on 1 Peter*, 1 Pet 4:12.

⁵ David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Peter*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 159.

The example narrative transitions into second Peter. Here "Israel" is referenced as a people, not a geographic area. We have made that explicit and contextualized it by the term "ancestor." If "ancestor" can be misconstrued as some sort of spirit or deity, then it should be changed to something like "among God's people."

As Arichea and Hatton recommend, we have used "false teachers" for "false prophets." It is also a cohesive term used in other stories in this set.

The equivalent of "false prophets" in the present is "false teachers." The focus here is not so much that these people claim to be sent by God when in fact they are not, or that they lay claim to the office of teacher to which they have no right, but that they have been teaching ideas and doctrines that are wrong. Their teachings are based not on any revelation from God but on their own ingenious inventions.⁶

The example narrative uses the broader term "shameful ways" to avoid limiting the scope of behavior to a specific category such as sexual sin. We have made it explicit that the false teachers are the ones bringing ridicule on the "way of truth, the Christian life."

In 2 Pet 2:3 the New Century Version translation expresses the greed and motives of the false teachers well. "The literal meaning of the Greek is 'forged/fabricated words.'"⁷ The example narrative uses "lies" to convey the original meaning.

The example narrative gives a summary sentence of the false teacher's agenda from 2 Pet 2:19. They promise "freedom," freedom from moral constraints such as sexual impulses and greed. We have made it explicit, "freedom from God's laws." The false teacher and their followers are slaves to "sin, depravity, corrup-

tion." We chose the word corruption. "Fighting corruption" is a frequent challenge faced across sub-Saharan Africa and around the world.

The example narrative provides the audience with a clear conclusion. We made explicit that the "last days" are before Jesus returns again. Scoffers are those who mock God's message, people who will laugh at you for having faith in God through Jesus.

Scholars agree that the scoffers/mockers are the false teachers. We have made that explicit in the example narrative. They ask a rhetorical question. If the story crafter's language does not use rhetorical questions, this phrase can be reworded. For example, "The false teachers said, 'Jesus did not tell the truth that he was coming again. He lied.'"⁸

The example narrative gives Peter's response from 2 Pet 3:9. "Lord" and "Christ" are referred to in these verses. We have used "God" as it is best for the context and simplicity of the story. Scholars conclude that Peter wrote God is patient for "your sake," not the inclusive "our sake."

God does not want anyone to be "destroyed, perish, to be lost, destined to hell." This is in a spiritual sense, as in the punishment for sin. "Repent" is unpacked for clarity of this important key biblical term. Ultimately, the promise of Jesus's return and the new heavens and the new earth is the concluding thought. Heavens is plural in multiple written translations but can be singular if this is confusing in the local language. In 2 Pet 3:13, we have unpacked "righteousness" in the example narrative as "people will do only what is right."⁹

The example narrative concludes with Peter's words similar to his letter format. The story concludes as it begins, warning about false teachers. A summary is often given in cultural narra-

⁶ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on the Letter from Jude and the Second Letter from Peter*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 103.

⁷ Elaine Thomas, *Translator's Notes on 2 Peter: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 1999), 2 Pet 2:3.

⁸ Arichea and Hatton, *Handbook Jude, Peter*, 145.

⁹ Thomas, *Translator's Notes on 2 Peter*, 2 Pet 3:13.

tives across West Africa. The concluding phrase is intentional to give the audience a blessing of encouragement from a father of the faith, Peter.

Background Information

Historical

Insult

"The nickname 'Christian' was originally used only by those hostile to Christianity.... Here it is parallel to legal charges like 'murderer' and 'thief.' Early Roman descriptions of Nero's persecution use this title for Jesus' followers. Many wise men in Greek tradition pointed out that it was truly noble to suffer scorn for doing good; in Greco-Roman society, obsessed as it was with shame and honor, this was a countercultural insight."¹⁰

Motives

"Traveling diviners, false prophets and moral teachers typically charged fees or begged funds and were thus frequently accused of having monetary motives unworthy of their professed callings. False teachers in the church were likewise exploiting Christians."¹¹

Biblical

History of false teachers

Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John reminded the believers that false teachers were to be expected. Peter recognized their presence as a fulfillment of prophecies from the Old Testament and from Jesus's teaching. "There always have been and there always will be false teachers among the people of God."¹²

Babylon/Rome

"That Rome was referred to as Babylon in both Jewish and Christian sources is known. In the Christian tradition 'Babylon' in Rev. 14:8; 17:5, 18; 18:2 refers to Rome. While 1 Peter is likely earlier than any of these references (unless one connects Revelation to the Neronian persecution), they all build on OT imagery. Babylon is the place of exile (Psalm 137; Isa 43:14 in context with 5-6) and it is a wicked and haughty city (Isaiah 13; Jeremiah 50-51; Dan 5:17-31). In Revelation, it is also the place of persecution (Rev 17:5-6), although this is also implied in the images of slaughter in the OT passages. All these meanings would be appropriate for 1 Peter. Our author is concerned with holiness (1:15-16), so Rome would surely impress him as the center of the evil in the world (cf. Revelation 18)."¹³

Characters

Peter

Christians living abroad

False teachers

Key Terms

Repent

To repent is to turn away, to regret your sins and turn and follow God through Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God (Acts 2:38).

Righteousness

Righteousness is the act of doing what God requires, doing what is right.¹⁴

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Electronic edition.

¹¹ Keener, *IVP NT*, Electronic edition.

¹² Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries v. 18 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 116.

¹³ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 202.

¹⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains v. 1*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 743.

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Story Guide 34

The Sufferings of Paul

Acts 18:1-11; 2 Cor 2:17; 11:4, 21-27; 12:8-10; 13:5, 10

Paul and Silas left Philippi, and on their missionary travels they continued to boldly declare that Jesus was the Promised Savior. Paul went to a city where he had not been before, Corinth, and made friends with believers there. Paul began working with them. Together they made tents to earn money to support themselves. Later Silas joined Paul, and a young man named Timothy.

Paul shared the good news about following God through faith in Jesus, and many people became followers. Paul stayed in Corinth and taught and preached for a year and a half. After Paul left Corinth to visit Jerusalem, he stayed in contact with the church.

Sometime later, after Paul's departure, false teachers were allowed into the church. They preached a different Jesus, a different Spirit, a different gospel. The false teachers took advantage of the church, and the church even gave them money! These men caused problems between the church and Paul.

So Paul wrote a letter and sent it to be read aloud to the members of the church in Corinth. This is some of what he said:

You see, we are not like the many swindlers or con men who preach for personal profit. We preach the word of God with pure motives because we know God is watching us.

Paul also wrote:

These false teachers have boasted about their qualifications. Let me tell you about some of my qualifications. I worked harder. I was put in prison, whipped more times than I could count, beaten with a stick, even had stones thrown at me to kill me. I was in three different shipwrecks in the ocean. Bandits attacked me. I have been threatened by both Jews and non-Jews. I have been hungry and cold.

He told them about other difficult things as well.

Paul wrote:

Three different times I begged God to take away a suffering from me, but he told me, "No, my grace is all you need." So, I boast about my weaknesses, and all the troubles that I suffer for Jesus. When I am weak, then I am strong in Jesus's power.

Paul told the church, "Examine yourselves to see if your faith in Jesus is genuine." Paul promised the church that his team would visit the church in Corinth soon.

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The letter we know as 2 Corinthians was addressed to the troubled church in Corinth. It is a beautifully complex letter that addresses multiple issues this young struggling church faced. The example crafted narrative is just one excerpt from Paul's teaching, not the whole of 2 Corinthians. Paul warned the church of the false teachers they allowed in the church. Their polished appearance and professionally trained debate skills, which Greeks appreciated, impressed the church (Acts 17:21).

Paul wrote to the church this follow-up letter to express his concern. False doctrine infiltrated the church. The church was impressed more with the outward style and conformity to culture rather than the content of the message taught. Paul likened their deception to that of Eve in the garden with Satan:

But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent. You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different kind of Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed. (2 Cor 11:3-4 NLT)

Modern-day hucksters in the best clothes appeal to audiences with stage productions and compelling "feel better about yourself" messages. Their messages appeal to the greed and desire for emotional positivity in our human nature. Prosperity and faith movements minimize suffering in all forms, from the physical to the financial. When difficulties and

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – Satan the Deceiver and his mission were introduced. Paul warned that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light to deceive people (2 Cor 11:14). The message the false teachers brought was a different Jesus, a different gospel from what Paul had taught them. The false teachers used deceptive language such as the serpent/Satan did when he spoke to Eve.

Suffering Because of Obedience, Jeremiah – While Jeremiah walked in obedience to God and declared the need to repent or else suffer the exile, he was abused, beaten, and put in stocks. Paul and Silas, even while obedient to the message God had given them, suffered abuse and beatings and were put in stocks.

Called to Suffer – Jesus warned his followers to be prepared to pick up their cross daily, to be prepared to suffer if they followed him. Paul in his obedience suffered hardships and abuse to make Jesus known to the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul suffered emotionally as false teachers brought heresy into the church that Paul planted at Corinth.

The Suffering of Jesus (crucifixion) – The Sufferings of Paul reveals a life of suffering in his obedience to Jesus. Jesus chose to suffer to redeem humankind to God. Paul wrote in his letters about identifying with Jesus in our suffering (Phil 3:10; Rom 8:17).

Peter and John, Poor but Rich – Peter healed the lame man in Jesus's name and authority. Paul said the same thing to the fortune-telling spirit in the slave girl. Peter, John, Paul, and Silas were all persecuted and put in jail while they served in obedience to God.

Not for Sale! Simon the Magician

Condemned – Paul was introduced in this story as part of the persecution that led to followers of Jesus leaving Jerusalem. **Paul, Chosen to Suffer** picks up on that persecution scene as he was actively seeking men and women to arrest.

Dear Timothy: Contentment in Suffering – Paul wrote one of his disciples, Timothy, to warn him that suffering is inevitable for a follower of Jesus. Paul encouraged Timothy to be content in the suffering.

suffering inevitably come, the victim's faith is often questioned. Prosperity proponents suggest that the victim's lack of faith—not believing or not giving—opened the door to suffering. As we mentioned in our notes for story 24, **Leave Everything (All Abandoned)**, Costi Hinn states that his uncle, Benny Hinn, taught, "No money? No miracle! Giving to God was the secret to unlocking your dreams."¹

Contrasting the boastful false teachers, Paul, in humility, wrote of how he served the humble King Jesus (2 Cor 10:1-2). Paul explained to the Corinthians some of the suffering he had endured for the gospel (2 Cor 11:23-27). It was a counter-cultural message. Jesus warned his followers to be prepared to suffer (Matt 16:24). Paul suffered as he obeyed God in his calling to proclaim the gospel.

This ultimate evaluation for the church in Corinth is also needed today. Is the message shared the true message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the gospel? Is there more emphasis on Jesus's power to perform self-serving miracles rather than the miracle of forgiveness of sin, Jesus's atonement on the cross and the reconciliation with God that it brings?

¹ Costi W. Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 46.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

The example narrative is intentionally brief because epistle stories prove more challenging to retell. The Epistles are dense in the theological teaching the author intended for his audience. Epistle stories are best paired with their corresponding narrative passages from the Book of Acts as a means of introduction. This example narrative has a long introduction to set the context of Paul's teaching.

Paul, in the letter known as 2 Corinthians, addressed different issues the young church faced. The example narrative focuses on the suffering he endured to date as an authentic apostle of Christ. This continues with the ongoing New Testament theme of this story set that Jesus warned his followers to be prepared to suffer.

This story picks up where the story **Paul Chosen to Suffer (Philippian Jailer)** left off. Paul and Silas continue their travels or journeys. This is normally referred to Paul's second missionary journey. Paul traveled from Athens to Corinth in southern Greece. Paul met and bonded with Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:1-2). We did not name this couple because they will not appear in future stories of this set. Note, we have made it explicit that Paul worked with them to support himself. This is an important detail for the greater story that is playing out in 2 Corinthians. Paul was a tentmaker, also known as a leather worker. Use "leather workers" if that is more appropriate for the target audience.

The story introduces a young man, Timothy. An upcoming story will feature him.

Keeping reproducibility and story length in mind, it was not possible to go into the greater detail of the narrative of Paul going into the local synagogue, being rejected and insulted. Paul

then focused his ministry on the Gentiles. Another series of stories about Paul would serve better for a church planting, missionary task theme.

Paul spent the next year-and-a-half discipling the new believers and teaching them the message from God. Express the amount of time spent teaching: "One-and-a-half years," "eighteen months," or "eighteen moons" in the way commonly expressed in the local language of the audience. Paul taught the church and continued to evangelize during this time. Acts 18:18 says, Paul stayed longer in Corinth, but scholars disagree if this meant one-and-a-half years total or in addition to the one-and-a-half years.²

Many Scripture translations use the heading "Paul returns to Antioch" prior to Acts 18:18. We have made explicit that Paul returned to Jerusalem, a city mentioned frequently in this story set (Acts 18:22).

After Paul left, he remained in contact with the Corinthians. This is a very broad statement that refers to Paul's intentional follow-up. Timothy and Titus visited Corinth on behalf of Paul (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 7:6-7). At some point, an unnamed significant problem arose. Paul returned to address this issue. In 2 Cor 2:1 Paul calls it the "painful visit." He followed up with a letter, the "severe letter" that Titus hand delivered (2 Cor 2:3-4). This letter has since been lost over time. The exact issue is unknown. Paul demonstrated genuine concern for the new church in Corinth. This concept of "keeping in touch," or "guarding the contact," a popular African Franco-phone phrase, emphasizes the importance of not forgetting or abandoning a relationship. Paul maintained contact with the church.

The example narrative uses a transitional phrase as the story moves from the book of Acts to 2 Corinthians. It reinforces Paul's departure before the arrival of the "super apostles."

² Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 351.

Paul used the phrase “super apostles” with a sarcastic tone, understood by the first-century audience (2 Cor 11:5). The modern audience may misinterpret this tone of sarcasm. We used “false teachers.” These “super apostles” were not part of the twelve closest followers, the apostles of Jesus. The false teachers in Corinth were Jewish Christians from Israel, although outwardly impressive, they taught a wrong interpretation of the gospel. They sought financial support, which Paul had declined. We used a summarized phrase of the abuse the church endured, “took advantage of the church” (2 Cor 11:19-20).

In this transitional paragraph, we have used the summary statement, “caused problems between Paul and the church” to prepare the audience for Paul’s rebuttal (2 Cor 3-5).

We begin the Epistle portion of the narrative in 2 Cor 2:17. The example narrative uses “swindlers or con men” as suggested by Christensen in *Translator’s Notes*. Story crafters should use the appropriate word for someone who sells something in a way that deceives the customer. “They did not preach to help those listening (2 Cor 11:7). They also changed the gospel (2 Cor 11:4) so that the hearers would be more eager to accept them and give them money. The NLT includes both of these meanings.”³

Contrasting these false teachers, Paul and his team taught with sincerity and pure motives. They were not self-serving. They did not receive financial support. They did not change the gospel to accommodate culture.

The “Fool’s Speech” is found in 2 Cor 11:1-12:3. Paul called himself a fool to get the attention of his audience. The false teachers bragged about their credentials. Paul’s counter argument was a clever literary device that used irony the first-century audience in Corinth would have understood.

Paul reminded the church of his credentials. We have focused on the suffering in his obedience for this story set. For the sake of reproducibility, we have not listed every traumatic experience Paul mentioned. If certain issues resonate better in the local context, use those points. For example, if the audience lives in a landlocked country, a shipwreck may not hold much meaning. We included “in the ocean” to clarify the term. We unpacked “stoning” to clarify that people would throw rocks at a victim until they died. We used the terms “Jew” and “non-Jew” as in previous stories to unpack the term *Gentile*.

The famous passage “thorn in Paul’s flesh” has been speculated to be many things. The Bible does not tell us what that is. The story crafter should not speculate on what this issue was. We do know Paul suffered from it. We identify the “thorn” as a more general term, suffering. An overall rule of orality translation is never become more specific with a term, only more general if the term does not communicate with the audience.

We have used “God” for the term Lord for clarity. God’s response was “No.” We have made that explicit in the example narrative. “My grace is all you need” (sufficient). God promised to provide Paul with the ability to cope with the suffering.

We have concluded this paragraph with a summary statement that ties back into the “boasting” that Paul addressed from the false teachers. Paul boasted of his weakness. We have summarized “the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles” as troubles. If story crafters find the audience can retell the story accurately with these specific points, use those details.

We have established in the introductory paragraph that Jesus was the “Promised Savior,” the consistent term we use in this set of stories for Messiah/Christ.

³ Steve Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on 2 Corinthians: Notes* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2016), 2 Cor 2:17.

The example narrative concludes with Paul's challenge to the church to "examine themselves to see if their faith in Jesus is genuine." This charge was to the whole church, not just those who had yet to repent.

Background Information

Historical

Paul refused financial support

In Judaism it was not considered proper for a scribe or rabbi to receive payment for his teaching, so many of them practiced a trade in addition to their study and teaching of the law.⁴

Clay jars

Corinth was famous for their pottery, especially the terra cotta lamps used throughout the ancient world. Paul referenced "treasure in jars of clay" (2 Cor 4:7).

Biblical

The early church

The community of followers of Jesus met in homes. In Corinth, several households made up the "church."

Mission Strategy

"It can be no accident that Paul positioned himself in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus, for they were bustling cities and formed a strategic triangle in the Aegean region, enabling the gospel to be spread along the busiest trading routes in the world."⁵

Characters

Paul

Silas

Timothy

Corinthians

False teachers

Key Terms

Christ

Christ is the Greek translation of Messiah (Hebrew, Aramaic), the one who fulfills the prophecy by reconciling man to God. This story set uses "Promised Savior" for this key term.

Grace

Grace is kindness from God that is unmerited, something not deserved. God does something for someone because he wants to, not because it is earned.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1988), 346.

⁵ Paul W. Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), 4.

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Story Guide 35

Joy Forever! Suffering Is Finished

John 20:31; Revelation 1:9; 13:1-14; 16:14-16; 19:11-21; 20:1-4, 7-15; 21:1-6; 22:2, 13

John, who was one of Jesus's twelve closest followers, helped to spread this good news. Like Peter and Paul, he wrote letters that were passed around to encourage the followers of Jesus. He also wrote an account of the life of Jesus, the Promised Savior. John lived to be an old man. John was arrested because he told people about Jesus, and he was sent to a remote prison island.

But God did not forget John. God gave John a vision about the events at the end of time and how Jesus will return. So John described what he saw in this vision, and John quoted Jesus in his letter:

Jesus said, "When I come, I'm going to come like a thief comes in the night. You won't know when I'm coming, but what's important is that you are ready when I come."

In the vision, John saw the future—a time of great violence and destruction. He saw famines, wars, plagues, and huge natural disasters. In that time, Satan will be permitted much power. Satan will bring up a man whom John described as a beast. He is called the antichrist by people. Satan will give him huge power. He'll be a ruler over many nations. He'll even have his own prophet. John called this prophet the second beast. And this second beast will perform amazing miracles in the name of the first beast, and he'll make people worship the beast. He'll also make a huge idol of the beast, and he'll make people worship the idol of the beast. And if they don't worship this idol, they'll be killed. Many people will be beheaded because they refuse to worship the beast.

John saw Satan and these beasts grow in arrogance to the point that they believed they could wage war on God and win. The beasts gathered all the armies of the world together in one place, called Armageddon, and prepared to face God in battle. Then John described what happened as he watched this huge army gathering at Armageddon—he looked up and he saw the heavens opened. He saw a white horse with a rider. John described the

rider as having eyes that were burning like flames, and the words coming out of his mouth were like a sword. And as he rode out, the armies of heaven followed him. On his robe was written his title: the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. It was Jesus.

As the armies gathered to fight Jesus, the beast and his prophet were captured. They were thrown into a lake of burning fire that burns forever. And then Jesus turned, and with his voice he killed everyone in the enemy army. Then Satan was taken and tied up with heavy chains. He was thrown in a deep pit, a prison, for one thousand years. Then John saw every person who had died because they refused to worship the beast—those who were beheaded. They were raised back to life. And they reigned in peace over all the earth with Jesus for a thousand years.

At the end of the thousand years, Satan was let out of his prison. John saw Satan deceive the nations again and turned them away from Jesus. Satan gathered a huge army, more than all the grains of sands on the seashore, to wage war against Jesus. This army surrounded the city where Jesus was, but fire came from heaven and utterly destroyed the army!

Then Satan was thrown into the lake of burning fire where he was to be tormented along with the beast and his false prophet forever.

Then John saw every person, from the beginning of time until then, all who had died, standing in front of God's throne. God judged them, the great and the small. If you did not follow God through faith in Jesus, you were thrown into the lake of fire. And then, death itself was thrown into the lake of fire and destroyed, because no one would ever die again.

Then John described how the earth and heaven, as they were, disappeared. A new heaven and a new earth replaced them. A voice from heaven called out, "Now God's kingdom is among his people. He will live with them, and they will be his people! He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more suffering, no more tears, no more crying, no more pain. All these things are gone forever." John saw the tree of life, available to everyone! "Its leaves bring healing to the nations," John wrote.

And Jesus turned to John, and he said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Write all these things down so that everyone will know that if they will come to me and follow me, they can live with me forever. I am coming soon."

True Prosperity versus the Counterfeit

The book of Revelation's symbolic language, though familiar to the original audience, has long been a challenge to the modern reader. It is often presented as shrouded in mystery and thought not accessible for an ordinary person. The letter circulated among the churches in the region to encourage them and to help them stay faithful through the suffering they were facing. Revelation is also a letter to followers of Jesus at the end of time. Both groups of his followers—the original audience and those to come—could take hope in knowing that Jesus is always with his people, and that he will return to vindicate his suffering and martyred children and establish fully the kingdom of God. He will defeat the true enemy, Satan, in the battle of Armageddon. Every person, the great and the small, will be judged. This letter gives us a glimpse of the realization of the kingdom of God: there is no more suffering in God's presence.

This example narrative presents a crafted story based on the chosen Scripture passages. No interpretation of the timeline of these events from the book of Revelation is provided. The objective of this story is to accomplish the theme of this story set, to address the errors of the prosperity gospel and the word of faith movement. The example narrative provides access to passages of the book of Revelation that are sometimes misunderstood or ignored. The audience has gone through thirty-four stories in preparation for this epic conclusion of the chronological set of stories. The set culminates in the victory found in God through faith in Jesus.

Versions of this story have been shared widely across West and Central Africa. It is most often the favorite story of the story crafting teams and testing groups. The story is explicit that God will judge everyone. Those who repented and followed God through faith in Jesus will remain in God's kingdom. Those who did not will be thrown into the lake of fire. God's kingdom,

where he reigns and rules forever, will be fully realized then.

This story plays an important role in addressing the theology of the prosperity gospel and word of faith movements. Professor Dieudonné Tamfu points out their error:

In the Old Testament, the prophets predicted the fulfillment of many great promises at the coming of Christ. In the New Testament, we discover that some of these promises are fulfilled at Jesus's first coming, while others will be fulfilled when he comes again. Prosperity preachers' failure to grasp this concept leads to drawing too much of the future into the present.¹

Today's prosperity movement interprets the future promises woven throughout Scripture as if they are reality now. Their teaching is that God's will is always that his people be "blessed," meaning they never suffer but always enjoy financial and personal success. Scripture does not support this definition of "blessed." After sin entered God's perfect creation, suffering and brokenness plagued men and women throughout history. The patriarchs Abraham, Joseph, and Moses were not exempt. Isaiah, the prophet, said the promised Savior himself would suffer to reconcile his people to God. Jesus endured the physical and emotional trauma and suffering of the cross as the perfect sacrifice. Jesus's closest followers and friends, Peter, John, and Paul, and the untold number of nameless martyrs around the world were not exempt from suffering even as they walked in obedience to God. Jesus promised us, in this world there will be trouble and suffering, but to take courage because he has overcome the world (John 16:33). In this concluding story, we look forward to Jesus's return, when all the promises of God's kingdom come to fulfillment. God will live among his people. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain" (Rev 21:4 NLT). Suffering will be finished.

¹ Dieudonné Tamfu, "The Gods of the Prosperity Gospel: Unmasking American Idols in Africa," *Desiring God*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-gods-of-the-prosperity-gospel#fn7>.

BIBLICAL COHESION

How the stories connect

Creation of the Spirit World – God created everything good. Satan and his followers rebelled and roamed the earth, intent on the deception and suffering of mankind. The example narrative, **Suffering Is Finished**, depicts a time when Satan and his demons are thrown into the lake of fire to suffer forever.

Creation – God created everything, and it was good. God created the world by speaking. God put two special trees in the garden, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. God lived in a perfect relationship with the man and the woman he created in his image. In the story **Suffering Is Finished**, the story of **Creation** will come full circle. Jesus will conquer the world's armies by speaking. Men and women will be back to the perfect relationship with God. He will live among them.

Disobedience – Satan tempted the man and woman to disobey God. Their choice to sin changed everything. Brokenness in individuals, broken relationships between people, suffering, and death entered the world. Access to the tree of life was denied. God promised that one day a descendant of the man and woman would destroy the tempter for God. In **Suffering Is Finished**, God revealed that Satan, the tempter and deceiver, will ultimately be destroyed. He will be thrown into the lake of fire. God will live among his people. People and relationships

will be restored. Every true Christian will have access to the tree of life.

Moses Interceded for God's Presence – Moses begged God to remain present with the descendants of Abraham. Moses did not want to move if God's presence did not move with them. Despite their commitment to the covenant with God, they worshiped a false god, the golden calf. John's vision in **Suffering is Finished** revealed that in the future God will live among his people again.

Called to Suffer – Jesus warned his disciples that if anyone would follow him, they must give up their own way. Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for Jesus's sake will find it. When Jesus returns, God will live among his people. He will comfort them and wipe the tears from their eyes. Death will be forever defeated.

Warning: Suffering and False Teachers – Peter wrote the elders in Asia Minor to warn them that Jesus's followers should expect suffering in this life. False teachers mocked Jesus's promise that he would return. The followers of Jesus eagerly awaited Jesus's return in the first century. They expected him at any time. **Suffering is Finished** reveals the time when the mocking will stop. Everyone will come before the throne for judgment by the just God. Sadly, the ultimate suffering will begin for those who refused to follow God through faith in Jesus. Jesus said he is coming soon and to be ready.

Learning the Story

Discourse

How the story works

This is a long story. Specific passages were selected in order to carry out the purpose of this story set. There are many other potential stories to be found in the book of Revelation. With the goal of reproducibility, the general orality rule is that the story length is 2–3 minutes. This varies depending on narrative content, contextuality, awareness of the biblical text as well as other variables. Reproducibility is a worthy goal as it promotes Scripture engagement, evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development. This story is the exception to the rule.

It has been consistently tested as essential to the overall understanding of the biblical narrative. This story aids in the concrete understanding of the highly symbolic prophecy of Revelation. The audience has gone through thirty-four stories in this set and is prepared for this epic conclusion story. If the setting is appropriate, consider a retelling of the story as a narration with drama to help visualize the scenes. Everyone in the audience should participate.

As mentioned above, no interpretation of the timeline of these events from the book of Revelation is provided. Story crafters are urged to avoid adding timeline commentary. This story is a broad summary of the events in Revelation. For the sake of reproducibility, not all events are included.

The grammatical tense changes throughout this story. John is talking about what he sees happening in his vision—at times as if it were happening at the moment or in the past and at times as if it were happening in the future (Rev 1:19). The verbs in chapter 20 are in the aorist tense and function as Hebrew prophetic perfects—meaning that they speak of the certainty of the future in terms of past action. You may use a future tense throughout your story if that is more natural.

The introduction links the previous stories of the apostles Peter and Paul writing their epistles as they neared the ends of their lives. We have used the word “account” for the gospel that bears John’s name. John’s focus in his Gospel account was for people to understand that Jesus was the fulfillment, the “Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). We have used the consistent term, “Promised Savior” as found in the stories leading up to this final story.

John was an old man when he wrote this book in AD 95–96. We made this explicit in the example narrative. Patmos was a Roman penal colony.² Story crafters should not give the impression that John was locked in a building in the desert. His punishment was a banishment or exile to an inhospitable island.

The first introductory paragraph introduced John and reminded the audience who John was. The second paragraph introduces John’s vision. It prepares the audience for what John saw in his vision. We have made it explicit that “God did not forget John” as observed in the vision God sent to John. The example narrative is not a comprehensive account of the letter of Revelation.

The story quotes Jesus throughout the narrative. This helps the audience have a mental image of the conversation and vision John is having. These images help the audience retain details and aid in accurate retelling. We have reordered the phrase, “coming like a thief in the night” to prepare the audience for the remainder of the vision and its urgency. The thief comes in the night when people are asleep in bed. We have made explicit the phrase “keep their clothing ready” as “be ready.”

For the sake of brevity of the story set, we have not included the address to the seven churches found in chapters 2–3. They can be independent stories in the appropriate story set or setting.

² Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of Revelation 1-11*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), Rev 1:9.

The famines, wars, and plagues described in Revelation 6–12 are too long to include in the story. A summary is in the example narrative to show that the end times are full of hardship and pain for the citizens of the world.

A transitional line introduces Satan, called the great dragon. Satan appears in previous stories in this story set: **Creation of the Spirit World** and the **Temptation of Jesus**. He is “permitted” much power. Satan does not have authority on his own, only the power God allows him to have (Job 1:7-12; Luke 4:6).

In Revelation 13, John saw a vivid vision of the enemies of God. We did not attempt to describe the creature that John saw. We use the word John used, “beast.” Note that in the example story, we made an oral marginal note of the familiar name, the antichrist. We have made explicit that the beast will be a “ruler over many nations” as depicted by the multiple heads, horns, and crowns that John saw in the vision. Story crafters need to make it clear to their audience that the beast is a person, not a creature.

The second beast that emerges performs religious service duties. He is also known as the prophet or false prophet (Rev 13:13-20; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The second beast demonstrates his power by performing miracles³ (2 Thess 2:9-10). The second beast had an “idol” made to represent the first beast. Story crafters should use the appropriate word, “idol,” or “image,” or “statue,” for an object to worship that looks like a person, god, or animal.⁴ Again, the second beast is a person, not a creature.

Note the pronouns in the story, “if you don’t, you’ll be killed.” This challenges the audience to

reflect on what they would do in this situation. For dramatic effect, we have included here the punishment of beheading for failure to worship the beast (Rev 20:4).

For the sake of brevity, the example narrative does not include the “mark of the beast” details. There is much speculation about what this mark is. It is highly likely to be confusing to the audience and detract from the central issue of the worship of the beast/antichrist.

We added a transitional sentence. It reminds the audience that John watched this scene of the world’s armies coming together at Armageddon (Rev 16:16). We included the name as it may be familiar to many in the audience. Scholars disagree on where this location will be, but the Megiddo valley in Israel is the most commonly held view of the location.⁵

We have made explicit that the rider of the white horse is Jesus. Revelation 19:12–16 describes him with multiple phrases. For the sake of brevity, we have shared only a few. Story crafting teams should choose the most impactful description for their setting and audience.

We did not include “sulfur” in the description of the “lake of burning fire” because sulfur may not be a known element in some audiences. We unpack this idiom as “burning” because lakes and water are not normally associated with fire.⁶

In the crafted story, we have chosen to interpret the sword that comes out of Jesus’s mouth and that kills the enemies as the “Word of God,” his voice itself. “The Word of God fights with the word, not a literal sword. By this he forces them to obey and believe in Him.”⁷

³ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of Revelation 12-22*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 175.

⁴ Johannes P Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains v. 1*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 64.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Rev 16:16.

⁶ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 5-6.

⁷ Trail, *Exegetical Summary 1-11*, 170.

At the end of the 1000 years, Satan will be released from his prison. We have unpacked the idiom, “the four corners of the earth,” as “all the nations.” We did not name the nations, “Gog” and “Magog,” the enemy nations. These names will most likely not be known to the general audience. Their identity today is speculated but is not explained further in Scripture.

In number, they are “like the sand on the seashore.” This clause is a metaphor. It indicates that the number of those who gathered for battle was very great. If the local language has an appropriate metaphor that conveys the same meaning, it may be used. We have generalized the city or camp as “God’s people.” There is scholarly debate over whether this is Jerusalem or the new Jerusalem, but such speculation is not encouraged for the crafted story.

We have generalized the great white throne judgment of Rev 20:11-12, “from the beginning of time until that moment.”

The throne room judgment scene may not be understood by your audience.⁸ We have kept this statement of judgment consistent with previous stories in this set: “If you did not follow God through faith in Jesus.” Other storytellers feel strongly that the “Book of Life” must be included in the judgment sequence. You may describe those whose names are not written in the Book of Life in a way that your audience will best understand. If you do describe the books, there is more than one book opened (Rev 20:12).

“Death itself was thrown into the lake of fire.” We did not differentiate between death/Hades for the sake of brevity. Community testing revealed the necessity of unpacking this phrase with “destroyed, because no one will ever die again.”⁹

The loud voice from the throne in Rev 21:4 is unidentified. It is not God himself.

We have used “God’s kingdom,” to designate his home (NLT) or dwelling place (ESV, NIV). This set of stories referenced God’s kingdom throughout. It is now fully realized.

We have included the detail of the tree of life that was first mentioned in the **Creation of the World** story. The leaves have the ability to heal all the peoples of the world. Other ways to translate this clause are: “the leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations” (NLT), or “the leaves of the tree will heal the nations” (GW).¹⁰

This emphasizes the full circle of this set of stories. The full circle was further emphasized when Jesus said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” The story concludes with the personal note like other epistle stories in this series, “I am coming soon.”

Background Information

Historical

Rome

At the time Revelation was written, the emperor was likely the widely hated Domitian. He demanded worship while he was alive. In the eastern part of the Empire, worshiping the image of the emperor in his temple could be a test of loyalty to the state. Anyone refusing to participate in the worship of the state was considered subversive, and Rome was always brutally paranoid about subversive religions.¹¹

Biblical

Patmos

John was in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9), which is in the Aegean Sea (eastern

⁸ Steve Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Revelation: Notes* (Dallas: SIL International, 2020), Rev 20:11.

⁹ Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Revelation*, Rev 20:14.

¹⁰ Christensen, *Translator’s Notes on Revelation*, Rev 22:4.

¹¹ Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, Rev. 1:9.

Mediterranean), some 100 kilometers (62 miles) southwest of Ephesus. Patmos was used as a prison by the Roman authorities, and John had been placed there, he says, “because I had proclaimed God’s word and the truth that Jesus revealed.”¹² Patmos was not deserted; it included a gymnasium and a temple of Artemis (the island’s patron deity).¹³ It was most likely a Roman penal colony.¹⁴

Beasts

The depiction of the two beasts in chapter 13 is based in part on Job 40–41, which is the only OT depiction of two Satanic beasts opposing God.¹⁵

Armageddon

Armageddon is the Greek name for the Hebrew “hill of Megiddo” (in the Plain of Esdraelon) where some of Israel’s important battles had been fought (e.g., King Josiah in 2 Kgs 23 and 2 Chr 35). In that place, the Israelites had destroyed many Canaanites. The actual physical location has been disputed, especially as there seems to be no mountain or hill by this name. Whether the name and location are meant to be taken literally or symbolically, a great battle not unlike previous battles of Israel’s victories over her enemies will be fought there.¹⁶

Characters

John

Jesus

God the Father

Satan

First beast/antichrist

Second beast/false prophet

Martyrs

All people

Key Terms

Angels

If you have a Bible translation, your best option would be to use the word in the translation, unless no one outside the church understands it. If you don’t have a Bible translation, your challenge is to find a word that accurately conveys the meaning of the original. An “angel” is a supernatural, spiritual being who is a messenger from God. Angels appear to humans in human form, they are inferior to Jesus, and they often come with a specific message or to do a specific task. If there is no word in the language for “angel” that a non-believer would understand, you could translate this as “messenger of/from God,” “envoy of God,” or perhaps “ambassador of God.” Be aware, though, that “prophet” also conveys those meanings. You might have to add “spirit (messenger from God)” to this description.

Heaven

Heaven can refer to the sky or to the place where God and his angels live, depending on the context. When it refers to the place where God lives, it is also the ultimate destination of believers. If your language does not have an adequate word for “heaven,” or if the hearers do not understand adequately the concept of heaven at this stage, you can replace it with “the place where God lives.”

Idol

An idol is a pagan object that represents a spirit or a god and is constructed by human hands for the purpose of worship, service, or great respect.

¹² Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 1.

¹³ Keener, *Bible Background Commentary, Rev 13*.

¹⁴ Trail, *Exegetical Summary Revelation 1–11*, Rev 1:9.

¹⁵ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Cambridge, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 682.

¹⁶ Robert H Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 301.

Promised Savior/Savior

Savior, as used in the New Testament, means “one who saves from spiritual and eternal danger.” Often, the wholeness of man includes both physical and spiritual aspects, which are difficult to distinguish, but the actual term savior in the New Testament is used only for Jesus as a spiritual deliverer. “Promised Savior” is the word we’ve chosen to use for the English version of the stories as the term to describe who Jesus is—the Messiah, the Christ, the Promised Savior. We have chosen, for the audience’s first exposure to the gospel, to use a consistent term for Jesus’s role in God’s redemptive plan throughout the story set. You should use a term that is consistent with your theme (such as Promised King, Anointed One, etc.). The terms Christ and Messiah have the same meaning, namely, “the person who is anointed (i.e., appointed) by God for a special purpose.” Anointing with oil was the symbol of being appointed and set apart by God for a position of authority and responsibility, especially for kingship, or as a high priest. Many aspects of Jesus’s roles and character are implied in the term Anointed One, including his kingship over all the nations, his role as God’s representative, his role as the means of bringing about God’s victory over his enemies, and finally, as the one appointed to accomplish redemption

for God’s people. Translation resources suggest that as we search for a way to translate the Messiah or Christ, we should search for a term that includes the concepts of one who is specially appointed by God, and one who is savior or king. Some languages do not have an appropriate personal noun that expresses the idea of savior, and it needs to be translated as “the one who saves,” or “the saving person.”

Worship

Worship’s foundation is the idea of service shown through showing awe and wonder to God. Different cultures and languages have different words for worship, some of which refer only to certain ceremonies or rituals one must do. In every story in this story set where “worship” is used, it implies more than just performing rituals. It includes the worshiper’s heart of love, awe, and wonder for God. Be sure that the word or combination of words you choose for worship includes this idea.

Some notes derived from Scripture Resource Team StoryCrafter’s Handbook, Tricia Stringer general editor.

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