



The
67th
book

A Hope House Series
June 2017

Hope
House

THE 67th BOOK

Each of us has a story – one filled with love, pain, disappointment, hope and faith, and one that God, if we let Him, is shaping, writing and using in His grand story of salvation for the world.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books that contains ordinary people's stories of faith. It contains stories of farmers, queens, fishermen, tax collectors, sceptics and unwilling prophets. It is the account of God's story for humankind breaking into the reality of human stories and changing them forever.

Our prayer is that over the next few weeks, as we consider the stories God writes in us and about us, that we will be encouraged to consider and reflect on what our unique stories are. What is the 67th book that God is writing in and through you? What is your story of faith and how can God use it to transform the world?

With hope & expectation,

Deline & Crae

The Hope House Team

“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony...” – Revelation 12:11

Week 1: A NEW STORY

Monday

The God of New Beginnings

Just about every story in Scripture is one of new beginnings. God is at work in the world making all things new and bringing about restoration (Revelation 21:1-5). He is working out His great story of redemption, and He encounters people on their journeys and invites them into His story. He invites each of us to let Him author a new story for our lives... a story of

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:22-23

hope, redemptive love, second chances and new beginnings. The prophet Jeremiah, in Lamentations, reminds us that God’s mercies are new every morning and that each new day is a chance at a blank page and a fresh start.

Perhaps you feel like your story right now is one of disappointment or shame. Maybe you feel like it’s a story that’s not really worth telling. Maybe it’s a story of deep pain and brokenness – or of going in all the wrong directions. Whatever your story may be, the incredible promise to us today is that God offers us a chance to let Him write a different story for us. He gives us a clean slate and if we let Him, He will make us part of a story that really matters for all eternity... the story about His love and His kingdom that will never end.

Perhaps you feel like your story is a good one right now and you are walking with God and allowing Him to direct your life. The good news for you is that

God has more in store for you. This is just the beginning. Our creative and infinite God wants to reveal more of Himself to you and take you to places with Him you can't even begin to imagine. You will never run out of new things with God.

Whether we want to start again with a brand new story, or continue in the great adventure we are living with God right now, we need to continually make the decision to give our story to God and let Him take hold of the pen. When we stop writing... He can start. When we make the decision to give ourselves and our lives over to God, then He becomes the author – and ultimately – He is the only one who really knows where we should go and how the story is going to end.

So come, just as you are, with whatever history has already been written, and give it all to God, trusting that He can do a new thing. His mercies are new every morning and He specialises in writing new stories, with fresh, new beginnings.

For Further Reading / Study

Revelation 21:1-5

Isaiah 43:15-21

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Tuesday

A story of shame to a story of worship

In Matthew 26 we read about a woman who came to anoint Jesus. She is described as an unsavoury character and so chances are, her story was one of sin, rejection and shame. She was not an invited guest at that gathering, but risked a great deal to come and pour out perfume, and more than that, to pour out love and adoration, on Jesus. She barged into the party amidst

whispers, scoffs and judgement, because people knew her story, and it wasn't a happy one. It was a story of shame and brokenness; a story of condemnation and exclusion. And yet, when she met Jesus, everything began to change. When we really encounter Jesus, our stories can be forever changed, just like hers was, because they become stories of hope in what God can do, rather than stories of our own failed attempts at getting things right.

After Mary's encounter with Jesus her story was transformed from one of shame and rejection to one of forgiveness and of worship. Jesus said about her in Matthew 26:13: *I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.*" In other words, Jesus was saying that she would be immortalised in the in larger story of God, not as a sinner, but as a worshipper.

God is in the business of transforming stories, and He can transform yours.

For Further Reading / Study

Matthew 26:6-13

Wednesday

A story of fear to a story of faith

Gideon's story seems like one that should originally not have made it into the record of Scripture. He was a very ordinary guy... in fact, he was, by his own admission, from the least important clan and he was the lowest ranking person in his family (Judges 6:15). There was nothing remarkable about him at all. When his story begins, we find him hiding in a winepress. The Midianites were attacking the Israelites and stealing their crops, so Gideon

was trying desperately to thresh his wheat out of site so that he wouldn't be harassed. He was minding his own business, living a story of intimidation and fear, and suddenly an angel shows up with the startling proclamation, *"God is with you mighty warrior"* (Judges 6:12). There is nothing mighty or warrior-like about Gideon at this moment in time, but God speaks over him, not as he is, but as he could be. He sees how his story could play out if Gideon will put his faith in Him.

Gideon's faith isn't instantly stirred and he has a great deal of trouble believing the angel's message that God has chosen him to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors. In his defence, it was completely unlikely and unexpected and there must've been many more qualified candidates. Eventually, after some doubts and uncertainty, some questions and asking God for signs, Gideon's story is transformed from one of fear to one of truly courageous faith as he goes where God has sent Him and takes on the Midianite army – not with the 32 000 men he originally gathered, but with just 300 willing participants that God chose. With a tiny army and a lot of faith, Gideon was used by God to defeat Israel's enemies.

His story is a reminder for us that God chooses and can use the most unlikely, ordinary people, to accomplish great things. All of our stories can be transformed from stories of fear into stories of great, inspiring faith that honour God. He finds us in the places where we are hiding and calls us, reminding us that He sees us not as we are, but as all we could be in Him. Will you allow God to transform your story into one of courageous faith? Will you say, "yes" when He calls?

All our stories can be transformed from stories of fear into stories of great, inspiring faith that honour God.

For Further Reading / Study

Judges 6-7

A story of rejection to a story of forgiveness

Joseph is remembered as one of the heroes of the Old Testament whose story ultimately becomes about saving a nation from famine. He ends up in a position of great power and prestige, but that is just the end of his story. His journey in getting to that point is a story of rejection and pain. Joseph was his father's favourite with big dreams about the way in which God would use him. As a result, his eleven brothers were very jealous of him and extreme sibling rivalry led them to selling Joseph into slavery and telling his father that he was killed by wild animals. Joseph was rejected and abused by his family in the most profound way, and ended up working as a servant in Egypt. Here, he worked hard and honestly and was promoted, until he was falsely accused and unfairly thrown into prison. Again, Joseph's story was one of unfair circumstances beyond his control that dictated the course of his life.

Joseph ended up in prison, and even there he was forgotten by people who had befriended him, but eventually, with his ability to interpret dreams, he was put in a position to help the Pharaoh and with God's help, he became an indispensable aid to him, managing and storing up food supplies for the impending famine. Joseph probably helped to save millions of lives, in Egypt and beyond.

He had faith that God was working behind the scenes, writing a story of purpose and good.

When Joseph was reunited with his brothers, many years after they had sold him into slavery, his response was truly remarkable. Despite all he had endured and the painful journey he had taken, he had faith that God was working behind the scenes, writing a story of purpose and good. Joseph said to them, *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but*

God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:19-21).

Joseph's story could so easily have been one about rejection and victimisation, but in the end, it turned into one of great heroism, faith and forgiveness. His story reminds us that no matter what may have happened or what pain we face today, God is working and can use all things, even the most painful experiences of our lives, to weave together a story of purpose and faith. Romans 8:28 reminds us that *"God works all things to the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose"*. Let Him take control and write a bigger story with your life.

For Further Reading / Study

Genesis 37, 39, 40 and 50

Friday

A story of self-righteousness to a story of self-sacrifice

Saul's story was all about self-righteousness. It was all about how he could be righteous on his own and was better than others because of his pious life and dedication to the Law of Moses. He was an extremely committed and religious person, so much so that he was one of the lead persecutors of the early church. His story was completely transformed one day as he was journeying on the road to Damascus. He was blinded by a light from heaven and Jesus spoke directly to Him saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

His name was changed from Saul to Paul and through the faithfulness and courage of a follower of Jesus called Ananias who wasn't afraid of this Christian-hater, but extended love and compassion to him, Paul's life and story was completely transformed. God gave him a new heart and a new purpose. He went from being a Christian-hater, to being possibly the most effective evangelist in all of history, continually risking his life to preach the Gospel of Jesus and suffering many persecutions, beatings, imprisonments and more for the sake of Christ. In Philippians 3 we read about Paul's change of heart and priorities:

Philippians 3:4-11

"If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."

Paul's story was transformed from one of self-righteousness to one of self-sacrifice. He learned to count everything that he had held as important and brag-worthy, as rubbish in comparison to knowing Jesus. He realised that true righteousness could never come from within, but comes from the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf

God does not disqualify people with questionable backgrounds or baggage from His service.

that calls us, in return, to live sacrificially for Him. Paul eventually wanted nothing more than knowing Jesus and experiencing His power at work in his life, but he realised that this involved sharing in both His power and His suffering and death. Paul sacrificed and endured many things for the sake of Jesus and his life stands as a testimony of the power of encountering Jesus and how that can change our stories forever.

For Further Reading / Study

Philippians 3

Acts 9:1-31

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Saturday

Writing a new story

Scripture is filled with stories that are changed by the love, grace and invitation of God.

David's story was quite a boring one, to be honest. He was a shepherd boy who was so unimportant that when the prophet Samuel asked his father to call all his sons because one of them was God's chosen to be anointed as the next king, his father either didn't bother to get him because he was so certain David wouldn't qualify, or he forgot that he was out in the fields... but David's story – the one with God – became a story of a victorious giant-slayer and a mighty king.

Esther's story was about a refugee girl with no status or power, even over her own life, but it ended up being about a queen who saved a nation.

We know that Peter was one of the disciples and he spent three years journeying with Jesus and learning from Him... really, he was one of His closest friends, but when it came to the crunch and things got really bad, Peter denied Jesus and ran for his life. It would be a really depressing story if that's where it ended for him, but God is the God of new stories. We read in John 21 about how Jesus restored Peter. He forgave him and brought him back into relationship with Himself. He gave him an incredible role to perform and He instilled the truth in Peter that He still believed in him and that He could still accomplish all that God had intended for him. Peter's story does not remain the story of a deserter and a denier. It becomes the story of a dedicated disciple who spent and ultimately sacrificed His life for the sake of the Gospel.

Each of us can write a new story. All we have to do is accept the grace of God that continually reaches out to us. Resolve to let Him use you, to choose to follow where He leads, to live a life of faith, and there is no telling where your journey will take you. At the end of the day, what story will be written about you? Will it be a story that brings honour

and glory to God? Will it be the story of a dedicated disciple? Will it be a story of love and compassion woven into the grand story of God?

Will your story be one of love and compassion woven into the grand story of God?

For Further Reading / Study

1 Samuel 15 & 16

John 21

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. How would you define and describe your story right now?
2. How do you hope your story will be different in the future?
3. How do you think you can let go and hand the pen over to God and let Him write your story?
4. Which person from Scripture's story inspires you most and why? With whom do you identify most?
5. What difference do you feel God has made in your story thus far?

Week 2: THE POWER OF A STORY

Monday

A testimony to overcome

Revelation 12 depicts an epic battle between the forces of good and evil that ends with Satan and his army being defeated. It is recorded that the reason for the triumph of God's people was because of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. We know that the blood of Jesus is powerful because it speaks of the atoning sacrifice He made when He died on the cross and defeated sin and death, but it is interesting to note that the word of the believers' testimony is also a powerful force against the forces of darkness. Why would our testimonies have such power?

Our stories of faith have great power because they are the indisputable truth of what God has done in us. People can argue with facts and debate what's written in the Bible or how it should be interpreted. Scholars can present opinions about theological issues, but our personal stories of what God has done, of how we have personally experienced His love and faithfulness, of how He has come through for us, of what difference it has made in our lives since we got to know Him, of miracles we have seen... those cannot be denied or debated.

Your story has the potential to bring people hope and encouragement. It has the ability to help some identify with the things you've been through and ignite faith in their hearts that God can transform their lives too. Our stories have the power to inspire others, to help them hold on when they are discouraged and to be stirred to greater faith.

Rick Warren writes: *“No other person on earth knows your story better than you do. Sharing your testimony with others can be a powerful and important way to tell God thank you for all he has done... You know what a testimony is. It’s not what lawyers do. It’s what a witness does. You’re not trying to convince anybody. You’re not trying to pressure someone for a decision. You’re just telling others what happened to you. Nobody can give your testimony except you. Unless you give a testimony about how God works in your life, your story will never be told. As you share your story, you’re expressing gratitude to God. You’re not only letting others know about what God is doing in your life, but you’re also being a model for a life of gratitude — which is incredibly important.”*¹

Unless you give a testimony about how God works in your life, your story will never be told. – Rick Warren

For Further Reading / Study

Revelation 12

Isaiah 12:24

Tuesday

Come and see

Some disciples get a lot more airtime than others. Peter is one of those we read about a lot. His stories – of triumphs and failures – populate the pages of the Gospels, but there are other disciples about whom we don’t hear a great deal. Andrew is one of the less-mentioned disciples, but he played a profound part in helping Peter come to know Jesus by simply extending an invitation. That’s what our stories of faith do – they extend an invitation to others to come and see what we have experienced.

Most of us probably don't feel equipped to have intense theological discussions with people or to expound on the Scriptures, but we can all invite someone to simply come and see what we're talking about. That's

Our faith stories extend an invitation...

exactly what Andrew did with his brother, Peter. In John 1:35-42 we read about how Andrew encountered Jesus and spent the day with Him. He immediately went back to find his brother, Simon Peter, and told him, "We have found the Messiah," and he took Peter back to meet Jesus. He invited him to simply come and see.

We won't all be the Peters of the world – those who turn history upside down and make a huge, visible impact for Christ – but we can all be the Andrews: those in the background who bring others to Jesus. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, wrote this about Andrew in his commentary on the Gospel of John when it says that Andrew "brought Simon to Jesus": *"This is the greatest service one person can render another."*

There is great power in our stories because they invite others to "come and see" the love and grace of God for themselves. Our stories are invitations to life.

For Further Reading / Study

John 1:35-42

Wednesday

Declare His praises

The power of our stories is tied up in simply honouring God for what He has done. When we acknowledge how God has worked in us and through us,

when we stop to remember how He has held us, shaped us, healed us and transformed our lives; when we acknowledge and glorify Him, He can do amazing things through us.

1 Peter 2:9 explains beautifully what God calls us to do in terms of sharing our stories:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Our stories have power because they reveal the practical and tangible ways God works in the world today.

Our stories have power because they reveal the practical and tangible ways God works in the world today. They point to the light in which God longs for all people to live, the hope He brings and the true life He offers.

The 66 books of Scripture reveal the heart of God to us and give us principles for how God works and Who He is, but the 67th book – the one that people see in your life – make His love and hope a present reality in our world, our time and our circumstances.

So what does the marvellous light of God look like in your life? Out of what darkness has He rescued you and what difference has it made for you to know Him? Declare His praises and share your story.

For Further Reading / Study

1 Peter 2:1-25

Philippians 2:1-18

Living your witness

While telling our faith stories is very important and sharing our testimonies has great power, the reality is that we tell a story about our faith and about God, whether we like it or not, because our lives and actions speak volumes. The people around us “read” us as ambassadors of Christ whether we intend to represent Him or not. The old adage “practice what you preach”

The people around us read us ambassadors of Christ whether we like it or not.

is critical for those who want to have an authentic witness. This doesn't mean that we have to be perfect, but it does mean that we have to be aware of the way our actions and lifestyles speak about our relationship with God, long before our words ever will.

1 Peter 3:15 tells us to always be ready to answer those who ask us about the hope we have. The author is assuming that people will ask us about why we are different – about why we have hope when others don't, about why we can have peace in the midst of difficult circumstances, about why we can choose to be loving when people's actions don't deserve a loving response.

Ultimately, what the world is looking for is authentic people. Authenticity is going to get us much further than any kind of feigned perfection or religiosity.

Part of authenticity means owning our stories – acknowledging where we have come from and where we have failed. When we do this, it gives God an opportunity to meet us in the midst of our messy stories and bring restoration, new hope and new life.

Brené Brown writes: “When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending.”

“You know the world's most frequently read book is the one you write every day. Every year, almost 200,000 books are written in the U.S. alone. But there is only one book everybody reads. The Holy Bible isn't it, even though it's the world's leading best seller of all time. The most frequently read book is the one you write every day. Remember, Paul the Apostle once said, "You are an epistle seen and read of men." So, whether you ever put pen to paper, you are writing a book. And people are carefully reading that personal manuscript as it unfolds. Consider it the 67th book of the Bible; the one that follows Revelation. It's your story. So, what drama is unfolding on each page? What message does it deliver to the world? What test are you turning into a testimony? This book you hold offers space to journal as you journey through the chapters of your life. Like the prophets and scribes, write your testament and make it plain.” – Sharon Frame

For Further Reading / Study

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Colossians 2:4-6:1

Peter 3:8-22

Friday

The power of THE story

Each of our individual stories is part of a much bigger story of what God is doing in the world. The Bible is made up of 66 books that were written over 4000 years by over 40 very different people from kings to

Our individual stories are part of God's grand story of redemption and hope

fishermen to farmers to religious leaders and yet, throughout the different stories of the individuals we find in its pages, Scripture contains an overarching story of how God is bringing redemption to the world. The golden thread of the love of God reaching out to humanity can be read on every page.

It is no different with the 67th book: the story God is writing about your life. It too forms part of the grand story of the salvation of God and how He is restoring, redeeming, loving and making things new. God invites us into His epic tale of love that He has been telling for millennia and that will continue until the world's end. We are invited to be part of the grand adventure of what He is doing in the world and to allow our story to become part of His big, eternal story.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that we are not alone on our faith journey. We are surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses” and we form part of the universal Church. We are connected with believers throughout the ages – from the people we read about in the Old Testament, to the first disciples of Jesus, to those today, who like us, are seeking to know and love Jesus. Our stories are collectively, the great story of how God is at work in the world and He is writing a great ending to the tale – one of hope and restoration and new beginnings.

“It’s as we inhabit the larger story that our own stories have meaning. Until that happens our lives drift, and we sometimes mistakenly try to make ourselves the center. We need the big story to orient by — like a north star that helps us navigate.” – Len Hjalmarsonⁱⁱ

For Further Reading / Study

Hebrews 12:1-13

1 Corinthians 12-31

The power of YOUR story

Not only does your story have the potential to inspire faith and hope in others, but when you tell it, it also fosters gratitude and faith in you. As Christians we have the terrible habit of forgetting what should remember and remembering what we should forget. It is all too easy for us to become so accustomed to our stories of faith that we forget what God has really done in and for us. It is hard to keep perspective about the miracles and

faithfulness of God you have experienced in your own life, so it's important to stop now and then and to remember. It's often helpful to write down your prayers and go back and see how God has answered them. I am always amazed when I do, to see how I bring God long lists of things I'm worried about and when I go back to them a few months later, the hand of God is so evident in the way He has dealt with many of those things.

That doesn't mean that our stories are only filled with experiences of God's goodness and faithfulness. They are undoubtedly marked with pain and confusion, with struggle and loss, but as we look back, and as we share our stories with others, the bigger picture starts to emerge that can often reveal to us how God has been shaping and forming us and how He has been at work, even when we didn't feel His presence. Telling our stories and looking back therefore fosters faith in our hearts and cultivates gratitude that heals, inspires hope and fosters health!

"... I once read a scientific study that said the two healthiest emotions are generosity and gratitude. People who demonstrate those emotions regularly are more resistant to disease and less likely to get ill than people who are grouchy and grumpy. When you publicly tell others about what God has

Not only does your story have the potential to inspire faith and hope in others; but when you tell it, it also fosters gratitude and faith in you.

done in your life, you let them in on this amazing health secret! You also give them a glimpse into God's will for their lives. The Bible says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18 NIV). God's will for our lives is gratitude in all circumstances." – Rick Warrenⁱⁱⁱ

YOUR story – with all its ups and downs, pain and promise, triumphs and failures, has great power to change you and to inspire others. So, will you share it?

For Further Reading / Study

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Psalms 34

Philippians 4:2-9

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. Why do you think our testimonies have spiritual power? Does this make you think about your story differently?
2. How does thinking back on what God has done in and for you cultivate gratitude in you? How do you think you can cultivate this gratitude more and better?
3. Why do you think it is significant that our stories are interwoven with the story of faith communities around the world and through the ages? What difference does that make?
4. How do you think you can invite others to “come and see” what difference knowing Jesus has made in your life?
5. How do you need to live your witness more effectively at present? What perhaps damages your witness that you need to address?

Week 3: MY STORY

Monday

Spiritual markers

“A spiritual marker identifies a time of decision when you clearly know that God guided you. Can you remember the moment you became a child of God? Were there specific times when He called you to His ways of living? Can you point to times when He clearly guided you in a decision? Were there times when He spoke powerfully to you about a commitment you should make? Keep track of these important moments! Regularly rehearse them and notice the steady progression in the way God has led you. This will help you understand God's activity in your life and give you a sense of direction as you face future decisions”. – Henry Blackaby^{iv}

Many times throughout the Old Testament we see people being instructed to build memorial altars or to stop along their journey and build some kind of physical marker as a reminder of what God has done. Certain moments on their spiritual journeys needed to be noted by some kind of physical action. A good example of this is Joshua 4:1-9 when the Israelites crossed over the Jordan River that God had parted for them, and entered the Promised Land. God instructed them to build an altar with stones from the river to mark this momentous occasion and so that when people looked at that altar in years to come, they would remember what God had done for them and recount the story of His faithfulness that day. On our journey too, there are spiritual markers – milestones along the way that mark important moments when God spoke to us, came through for us, revealed Himself to us or directed us.

As you reflect on your story, what are the spiritual markers that mark your path? What are the moments that have defined your faith journey and what has stood out for you?

Spend some time today writing down some of your spiritual markers and reflect on how they have shaped your story up to this point.

For Further Reading / Study

Genesis 28:10-22

Exodus 17:8-16

Joshua 4:1-9

Tuesday

A redeemed past

No one's story is perfect. If anything, most of the characters in Scripture should give us hope that a perfect story and a squeaky clean history are certainly not requirements to be used by God. Most of the people we read about are represented as deeply flawed individuals, with checked histories and many problems and short-comings that may seem to make them unsuitable to be part of God's story. And yet, God chooses to use the most unlikely people and He redeems the messiest stories and makes them stories, not of failure, but of grace.

There are things I'm sure all of us would like to erase from our stories if we could... sin done by us, or sin done to us; pain that we carry, things that went wrong, bad decisions we made... but God offers us so much hope in the fact that He forgives our sin, chooses to forget our failings, makes us new and redeems even the worst of our situations.

Although not all your life experiences were sent by God, He uses every experience to develop us into the people He plans for us to be and to accomplish His purposes in and through us.

Perhaps one of the most amazing promises in the Word is the one we find in Romans 8:28 that assures us that no matter what happens, God is working all things for our good and His glory. Even the most painful experience is used by God to shape, transform, teach and reach us... and to weave together a story that will ultimately glorify God and can impact others. God redeems all things, even and especially our past and our pain, if we will place it all in His hands.

Even the most painful experience is used by God to shape, transform, teach and reach us...

Romans 8:28:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

For Further Reading / Study

Psalm 103

Romans 8:18-39

Wednesday

Pain to promise

Our most painful experiences can often become our greatest witness if we let them. There is a beautiful promise in Scripture that speaks to Jesus’ mission in the world. The prophet Isaiah wrote these words,

Our most painful experiences can often become our greatest witness if we let them.

and Jesus read some of this passage thousands of years later and declared that the prophecy had found its fulfilment in Him. Isaiah wrote:

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour.”
– Isaiah 61:1-3*

Beauty for ashes... isn’t that a beautiful and profound image? Even in the places of ashes, of deadness, of despair, of hopelessness and at the end of the road when there is nothing left, God can bring beauty. He resurrects our painful experiences and can transform them into something beautiful... something that can help others know His love and power. The places of our deepest pain often become the places of our most effective ministry if we are willing to allow God into those spaces. God never wastes our pain. If we will bring Him our brokenness, He can and will transform it into something that can be used to bring victory and to help us and others overcome.

This doesn’t mean that our pain doesn’t matter, or that it hurts any less, but it does mean that there is hope in it. In the darkest places in our lives, God

can shine His light, and when we are ready and able, if we are able to share those stories with others, they will bring hope, life and beauty in ways we could not have imagined.

For Further Reading / Study

Isaiah 61

Luke 4:14-30

Psalm 126

Thursday

Rejoicing in God's faithfulness

It is not just our painful experiences that make up our testimony and can witness to others. The way God has come through for us, the miracles we've experienced and the joy we've known in relationship with Him are equally as important. In Philippians 4, the author, Paul, encourages us to "rejoice in the Lord always". God wants us to delight in Him, to rejoice in the things He has done for us and to declare His praises to the world. Our lives should reflect His glory and offer hope to those around us.

When you reflect on your own life, how much time do you really spend rejoicing in the Lord? Do you even acknowledge all the ways in which He has blessed you and been faithful? Do you pause from time to time and just allow your heart to be filled with gratitude for what He has done?

Today, spend some time thanking God for everything He's done for you and write down some things for which you are grateful. Remember how He has come through for you.

Psalm 145 below is a beautiful declaration of praise. Use this to guide your prayer today:

Psalm 145

- 1 I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.*
- 2 Every day I will praise you
and extol your name for ever and ever.*
- 3 Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.*
- 4 One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts.*
- 5 They speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty –
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.*
- 6 They tell of the power of your awesome works –
and I will proclaim your great deeds.*
- 7 They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.*
- 8 The Lord is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.*
- 9 The Lord is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.*
- 10 All your works praise you, Lord;
your faithful people extol you.*
- 11 They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,*
- 12 so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.*
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.*

*The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does.*

*14 The Lord upholds all who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.*

*15 The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.*

*16 You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*

*17 The Lord is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.*

*18 The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.*

*19 He fulfils the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.*

*20 The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

*21 My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever.*

For Further Reading / Study

Philippians 4:4-9

Psalm 34

Friday

Your unique story

No two stories are alike. Your story is as unique as you are. Many of us struggle with comparison and looking at others and thinking that somehow our experiences should be more like theirs, but that is not what God intends.

While other people's testimonies should encourage us and inspire faith in our hearts, they should never make us feel like ours are less important or less worthy of being heard.

Some people's faith journey doesn't have a clear defining moment of divine insight that set their life on a different path. Not everyone's story includes a "lights in the sky" kind of experience. Many stories are quieter and less flashy. Some people's conversion experience is not a profound once off moment, but a slow, steady, quiet kind of journey from darkness into light. Whatever your story is, know that it has incredible value and that God wants you to share it. Your story will impact people that other people's stories won't. Different people will relate better to different experiences and God can and does use every story and every willing heart.

Don't get stuck in comparison. Know that your story matters and needs to be heard.

"You weren't an accident. You weren't mass produced. You aren't an assembly-line product. You were deliberately planned, specifically gifted, and lovingly positioned on the Earth by the Master Craftsman."

– Max Lucado

For Further Reading / Study

1 Corinthians 12:15-26

Saturday

Write down your story

Spend some time today reflecting on what you've read this week and take some time to write down your story. It is always a good exercise to write your testimony down so that it is in the forefront of your mind for when God makes opportunities available for you to share it with others.

Here are some helpful pointers about how to write your testimony from CRU.org:

Ask yourself the following:

Before I Accepted Christ (or gave Him complete control)

1. What was my life like that will relate most to the non-Christian?
2. What did my life revolve around the most? What did I get my security or happiness from? (The non-Christian is relying on something external to give him/her happiness)
3. How did those areas begin to let me down?

How I Received Christ (or gave Him complete control)

1. When was the first time I heard the gospel? (Or when was I exposed to dynamic Christianity)
2. What were my initial reactions?
3. When did my attitude begin to turn around? Why?
4. What were the final struggles that went through my mind just before I accepted Christ?
5. Why did I go ahead and accept Christ?

After I Accepted Christ (or gave Him complete control)

1. What are specific changes and illustrations about the changes Christ has made? How is my life different and better?
2. Why am I motivated differently?

Helpful Hints

1. Write the way you speak; make the testimony yours.
2. Practice this over and over until it becomes natural.

3. Shoot for short - 3 minutes. At that length, it's easily something you can put into a conversation without it becoming a monologue.^v

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. What are some of the most profound spiritual markers on your journey of faith?
2. What painful experiences has God turned into testimonies in your life?
3. Are there parts of your story or history you need to let go of that are holding you captive? Where do you need God's renewal?
4. How do you think we can avoid comparing our stories with others'?
5. What was it like to write down your story? What insights did you gain? What gratitude was cultivated in your heart?

Week 4: SHARING YOUR STORY

Monday

Commanded & commissioned to witness

Evangelism is a scary word for many. The idea of “evangelising” or sharing the Gospel can be very intimidating, but the truth is that God calls each of us to share His good news with others. We are called and commanded to share our stories of faith. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He left His followers with the Great Commission to go and make disciples, telling people about Him and instructing them in His ways (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus didn't give the commission to make disciples to a chosen few who were good speakers or great scholars and thinkers. He didn't call the articulate or the courageous – it was a call to everyone who followed Him (from brash, opinionated Peter, to doubting Thomas) and it is still the call to all His followers today... GO and make disciples. It's not something to be left to the few that have the gifts or the inclination. Each of us have a sphere of influence in which God wants us to share His message and each of us are called tell others the story of His amazing love. The commission and command of God still stands today and as the great missionary Hudson Taylor once said: “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.”

As crazy as it seems, WE (you and I) are God's plan for getting the message of Christ and His love to the world. There is no plan B and there is no backup. He has chosen and ordained that His people would be the means by which He rescues the world. As Paul writes in Romans 10, God extends His salvation to everyone, but how will people hear the Good News if those who have been transformed by it do not tell them?

Romans 10 vs 13-17:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”

Paul reminds us that although Christ has made His salvation available, we need to make it accessible. In order for people to know about the saving love of God, someone has to be willing to share the message of Christ with those who have not heard or understood it.

Christ has made his salvation available. We need to make it accessible.

This command to share our faith and stories, should not be a burdensome, heavy one for us. We are, after all, commissioned to go and tell others the Gospel, which literally means, the GOOD NEWS. It should be a joy for us to tell others about the difference God has made in our lives because ultimately, the news of Christ’s love and redemption is the best news anyone could ever receive: that we are redeemed by the love and grace of God through the sacrifice of Jesus and that we are chosen, beloved children of the Most High God.

For Further Reading / Study

Romans 10:1-21

Matthew 28:16-20

Empowered to witness

The concept of sharing our faith can be intimidating and often, we don't know where to start. Generally, it is through relationship and the testimony of our lives that we can best impact people as we journey in authentic relationship with them, but we are also assured in Scripture that when the time does come to speak about faith, we will be empowered by God's Spirit to do so.

In Acts 1 we read that Jesus said to His disciples: *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). Previously Jesus had also encouraged His followers saying: *"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"* (Luke 10:11-12). If we are open to being used by God, He will give us the words to say and help us engage with those around us in a way that has the potential to bring redemption and life.

Bill Hybels argues that evangelism should be as simple as just walking across the room... living in such a way that we are open and sensitive to the opportunities God gives us to have faith conversations, and that our stories of what God has done for us and in us should naturally flow out of us in gratitude and a desire to see people come to know the love and grace of Jesus.

"More than two thousand years ago, Jesus himself introduced the perfect model for evangelism. He left the marvellous adoration of the angels and the perfection of heaven, and he chose to "walk" clear across the cosmos. He had no memorized script, no forced formulas. Instead, he was armed only with an offer of redemption to people just like you and me, many of whom

were neck-deep in pain of their own making. Today, the goal for every Christian is to reflect Christ's love and follow his example by taking simple walks across rooms--leaving our circles of comfort and extending hands of care, compassion, and inclusiveness to people living far from God... The stakes are high. The implications are eternal. And you may be only a conversation away from having unparalleled impact on someone's life--if you will just walk across the room." – Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room*

For Further Reading / Study

Acts 1

Luke 10

Wednesday

Building redemptive relationships

A redemptive relationship is allowing yourself to be vulnerable in a space in which your faith journey forms part of a conversation and you actively engage with someone with the intention of helping them to come to know the privilege of being in relationship with Christ.

This doesn't mean that you're out there in someone's face necessarily, bashing them over the head with a Bible. Rather, it means that you build a significant, meaningful relationship with someone, so that it becomes a safe space for conversations about faith to become non-threatening and in which your life can witness to them as they see what God does in and through you.

Jesus tells us that we are "the light of the world..." and Matthew 5:16 says, "Let your light shine before all people so that they will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven..."

This doesn't work from afar. We talk about "being light" or "shining our light", but you can't just happily shine away over here and expect people way over there who don't even know you are a Christian to really be impacted by it.

In order to impact people with the Gospel message, you actually have to be in relationship with them, and so we have to seek out relationships in which to do this – to speak life, truth, grace...

And sometimes this doesn't happen right away. Sometimes you get shut down. You might just need to be someone's friend for many years before you get to a place of actually sharing your faith with them, but you'll never get there if you don't try and if you're not intentional about it.

Bill Hybels talks about the fact that Christians become either "connectors" (those who connect with those who are far from God) or "cocooners" (those who become insular and spend all their time with those who are saved). We have to guard against cocooning and pray for ways to become better connectors.

We are called to step out of our comfort zones in sharing the Good News about Jesus, but evangelism doesn't necessarily mean doing things completely contrary to our personalities. There are opportunities to share God's love with people in our sphere of influence, in our own unique way, with the nature and style God has given each of us. So let us pray that God will really open our eyes to those opportunities.

We don't have to have everything figured out about faith before we can build redemptive relationships. We just have to be willing. We don't have to have it all together. In fact, our failures and the way we deal with them can often be the most profound witness of our lives. People usually respond to authenticity, to our questions and grappling with our faith, much more than they do to pat answers and theological treatise.

So what redemptive relationship can you build? Who is God calling you to pray for? With whom will you journey and share your story – your whole beautiful, messy, sometimes painful, sometimes confusing, redemptive story?

For Further Reading / Study

Matthew 5:13-16

Thursday

Pitfalls to avoid

When sharing our stories of faith with others, there are some pitfalls we should avoid:

1. **Christianese**

Those who have been in church circles for a while, or have been Christians for some time, tend to develop a “Christianese” type of language that is not at all helpful when trying to relate a message of grace and salvation to non-believers. We should use every day, simple language to which people can relate. Trying to explain concepts like “sanctification” or “atonement”, or quoting Scriptures or prophecies that God has used to speak to us may not make a great deal of sense to those who don’t yet have faith. These things have their time and place, but when first sharing our faith with others, it’s a good idea to keep things very simple and to steer clear of being overly “religious”.

2. **Being preachy or condescending**

The great thing about a story, as opposed to a sermon, is that it is simply an account of what God has done in your life and offers no judgements or

condescension. The moment people feel like we think we are superior to them for any reason, they will shut down completely.

3. Going on forever

One of the reasons it's a good idea to write down your testimony is so that you can ensure that you know exactly what the salient points are that you would want to share with someone and that you don't go into all kinds of irrelevant detail that makes your story way too long for someone to really take in. We can share our stories in more detail in relationship with people over time, but for first faith-conversations, make sure to keep your story short and to the point.

We can get ourselves really worked up about evangelising and the pressure that goes with that, but God simply asks us to tell people our stories and to be open to the promptings of His Spirit, and He will do the rest.

For Further Reading / Study

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Friday

Divine appointments

There are three key elements to being an effective evangelist in the world. Firstly, you have to be willing to share your story and tell people about God's love. Secondly, you have to be a credible witness and your life should represent God in a way that draws others to Him and backs up your story of the difference He's made in you. The third key ingredient in effective

evangelism is being sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the One that ultimately takes hold of people's hearts, convinces people of the truth of the Gospel and brings about renewal. The Spirit chooses to work through us and

to use our stories and our witness. Therefore, we need to ensure that we are keeping in step with the Spirit and learning, more and more, to respond to His promptings.

In Acts, we see that Paul was hindered, on more than one occasion, from going somewhere he had planned, because he felt that the Spirit didn't want him to go and preach there (Acts 16:6-10). Had he forged ahead with his own agenda, his ministry would have been much less effective. If Philip had not been in tune with the Spirit of God, He would not have been in a place to meet the Ethiopian who came to know God, and He would not have known what to say to him to stir his heart and lead to His conversion (Acts 8:26-40).

We need to be sensitive to the Spirit of God and quieten our hearts enough to hear when He speaks to us. We need to pray for divine opportunities to share our faith with others and then wait on the Spirit to reveal them. Even inconveniences, delays and change of plans can be God's way of getting us into places we wouldn't necessarily have been because He has a divine appointment scheduled for us. Will we notice? Will we be ready? Will we learn to lean in and listen?

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- 1. Be willing to share your story.**
 - 2. Be a credible witness**
 - 3. Be sensitive to the Spirit**
-

For Further Reading / Study

Acts 8:26-40

Acts 16:6-10

It all comes down to love

“Nothing is more of a hindrance to the message of Jesus than a lack of love between Christians.” – Nicky Gumble

Jesus said that His disciples would be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). Love is meant to be the mark of the Christian community and of every Christ follower. Love is intended to be what defines us and what draws people to us and it is by far the most effective tool for evangelism we possess. Everyone wants to be loved and everyone hungers, deep down, for the infinite, unfailing, redeeming love of God. It is our job to reveal it to them by serving and loving them in a way that points them to the love of Jesus.

When we look at the way Jesus engaged with people during His time on earth, we notice that He always extended love and grace. He drew people to Himself because He served them and because He loved them. As in all things, He is our example of the best way to go about winning the world for Him: extending grace, serving and showing love, even and especially where it is not deserved.

The love to which we are called is not comfortable. It takes us out of our comfort zones and calls us to love those who are different from us, who don't agree with us and who aren't very loveable. It calls us to reach out to those on the outside, on the periphery of society and those no one else seems to care about. It is a love that costs and a love that transforms.

“Love is the most effective form of evangelism. When people see real love, they see God. The best way to start to tell people about Jesus is to love them and to love other followers of Jesus. Generally, in the world, people get into groups with people they are naturally attracted to and who think the same

way as them. We are meant to be quite different. The church of Jesus Christ brings together people from different backgrounds, of different interests, different ages, ethnicities, races, perspectives, lifestyles, opinions and views: all who love one another.” – Nicky Gumble

For Further Reading / Study

1 Corinthians 13

John 13:1-35

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion

1. How are you currently responding to the command and calling to witness?
2. How do you think you can experience and acknowledge the empowering of the Spirit to share your faith more?
3. With whom are you currently building redemptive relationships?
4. How do you think you can learn to be more sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and pray for, and then act on, divine appointments?
5. How can you practically be more loving to those around you so that you will reflect God’s love to the world better?



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