

The Use of Story in Evangelism and Discipleship

Her daughter was tugging on her sleeve, but Susanna was lost in thought. Her eyes followed the Master as he got out of the boat and huddled with the twelve, but her mind was still on the story he had just told the crowd.

The tugging continued.

“Mamá, Mamá!” Joanna got her mother’s attention.

“Yes, Joana, what is it, dear One?”

“Why did he throw seed in the bad places? Didn’t he know it wouldn’t grow there?” Joanna asked her mother innocently.

“What, Honey?” her mother replied.

“Why did the Farmer throw seed on the pathway, and in the rocks, and in the thorns? Seeds don’t grow there. Didn’t the farmer know that?”

“Well yes, I suppose he did. But I’m not sure that the farmer *meant* to throw seed in the pathway, or the rocks, or even in the thorns. You see, the farmer had come out some time before and tilled his farmland,” Susanna explained to her daughter.

“Tilled?” Joanna asked with a puzzled look on her face.

“Yes, Sweetie, “tilled” means the farmer *prepared* the soil. He went out to his farmland—probably something like this rectangle of land right there—and he dug it up, turned it over, picked up the stones that were in the field and threw them off to the side. He got his land all ready to receive the seed.”

As Susanna spoke, it hit her. Could this be the lesson—at least part of it—that the Master was trying to teach with this story of the Sower? She glanced back to the shore, pensively. The Master and the Twelve were finishing their meeting.

“Mamá!”

Startled, Susanna turned back to her daughter. “I’m sorry, dear. The farmer prepared his field at least the day before. Then, he came out to his prepared field there (gesturing to the rectangle) and started to sow the seed. He threw it onto the field and as he went along—wanting to be sure to get seed in every corner of his field—he *overthrew* some of the seed. It landed in the rocks he piled up at the edge of his field. Some of it landed in the thorns just outside his beautifully prepared field. And some landed in the pathway, just like this one that people use to walk by farmland.

Joanna tugged again on her mother’s sleeve. She turned to her smiling. She saw her daughter wide-eyed looking just above her. Joanna pointed.

Susanna turned to see the Master right behind her, listening. She stood quickly, blushing. “I’m sorry, Master.”

He simply gave her an affirming nod, smiled warmly, and led his disciples to their next appointment.

The mother and daughter watched Him walk down the road, talking with His followers. When they were out of sight around the bend in the road, Susanna commented, half to her daughter, half to herself, “The Master’s stories are always so fascinating, but I don’t always understand. Your question helped me understand what I think is the point to this one: Just as the soil needs to be prepared for seed to grow, so our hearts need to be prepared to receive the word of God so it will produce fruit in our lives. Come on, I’ll race you home!”

Just as the soil needs to be prepared for seed to grow, so our hearts need to be prepared to receive the word of God so it will produce fruit in our lives.

What did you think of that story? Can you imagine telling it as you open a discipleship class session or as you start a message in church? Every time I have told that story, you could hear a pin drop as people sat on the edge of their seats, eyes wide with anticipation. There is something about a story that gets people’s attention and gets to their hearts. Why is that? I believe it has to do with the way God made us. Let’s look at four examples of using story in evangelism and discipleship (teaching).

Some Biblical Examples

Stop and think for a minute. Can you come up with personalities in the Bible who used story in their teaching in both the Old and New Testaments? After you think of a few, ask yourself the question: “What was the desired outcome?”

How did you do? I believe there could be many, but we will touch on just three. Who is the most conspicuous example in the Bible? Everyone at once: **Jesus!** That’s right. And we all would cite the parables as the most obvious teaching stories of all.

But another example in the New Testament is Stephen. He didn’t have a long ministry, however he did tell a long story that became famous. But was he successful? You are probably saying, “You cite Stephen as an example of using story in evangelism and you’re not going to get a lot of followers!” Maybe, but we’ll touch on his success in just a moment.

First, let’s go to the Old Testament. Do we have any examples of story in teaching (discipleship) there? One stands out: Nathan. He told King David a nice little story about a man and his lamb, didn’t he? And he got a response. That leads us to the next question:

What was the desired outcome? In each of these instances in the Bible (Jesus with His parables, Stephen with his long story, and Nathan with his short story) what were they looking for in their hearers? As I have asked that question on several continents, two one-word responses come back more than any other: change and emotion.

I tend to agree. In each instance, the story-teller is looking for change (repentance) in the lives of the hearers and he probably is trying to get the emotions of the hearer involved as well. Whether the second one is a stated goal or not, it becomes obvious very quickly that emotion is evoked.

Why are the parables so popular even today? They are stories to which people can relate. Why did Stephen get stoned? Because he told his story and told his hearers they were just like their fathers—

and they proved it by killing him. (By the way, he may not have been successful by our standards, but Jesus gave him a standing ovation!) Why was Nathan successful in encouraging repentance from David? He told a story to which David could relate (and boy, did he relate!) and then said “You are the man.”)

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These stories evoked emotion and called for change. What are we looking for in our evangelism and discipleship, whether we are sharing one-on-one or with a group? What the profs taught me in Bible College was that we teach and preach for **change**. Stories can help. They did for Jesus, Stephen, and Nathan.

Consider using stories in your evangelism and discipleship. Start with your faith story. Maybe tell a story of another person with whom you have shared who responded positively to the gospel. Think of some other possibilities.

So, we looked biblical examples of using story as we look for true change or repentance in people’s lives. Let’s move on to another example of people using stories. Although rabbis were not necessarily involved in evangelism as we define it, they were great teachers and provide us with an example of using story in teaching.

A Jewish Example

Jewish Rabbis have used “Midrashim” for years in their teaching. What’s a Midrash? No, it’s not a red, itchy patch on your tummy. To quote from the institute for Contemporary Midrash (<http://www.icmidrash.org>): *midrash...*“fills in the cracks...puts flesh on the bones...reinterprets stories and characters...gives a voice to those in the story who have no voice.”

What the rabbis would do was craft a story to accompany an Old Testament story with the objective of developing or teaching a lesson from the Bible. Rabbis would take a Bible story, determine what they want to teach through that story and then develop a new story—maybe even using a character in the story—to teach the lesson.

I opened the article with a midrash (see the first few paragraphs). The story opens with Susanna pondering what Jesus meant with his parable of the soils. As she answers a question her daughter poses to her, she begins to realize Jesus’ possible intent in telling the parable. Telling Susanna’s story helps me establish an important Good Soil point with my hearers.

Below you will find another midrash I’ve used in teaching the Psalms of Ascent.

The morning was cool. In the fireplace lay only smoldering embers which sent a thin line of smoke up the chimney. I saw *Abba*, Daddy, get out from under his covers quietly and stir the embers. Then, he carefully opened the door and went outside, trying not to wake Mama and little brother and sister. I went to the window.

There, I peeked outside and saw Abba looking up at the hills in the distance. He got down on his knees and prayed for some time. Still on his knees, he looked again at the hills, grinned, and said, “121!” Then he jumped up, clapped his hands, and shouted, “*Adonai* be praised! Alleluia!” Abba wasted no time waking us up, and with Mama’s help, we got the babies washed and fed.

Today we are going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles! It is the first time that we all will be accompanying Abba for the trip. Since I can remember, Abba would go to Jerusalem three times every year to worship Adonai. When he would return, he had so many stories to tell. I love to hear Abba talk of his adventures. Now we are going with him!

In no time we had the donkey loaded and were ready to go. Abba prayed for *Elohim's* protection, and we began our journey. As we started walking, Abba began to sing a slow, mournful tune: "I call on Adonai in my distress, I call on the Lord and He answers me..." After that came a livelier tune about God watching over us on our trip. Abba began to sing a line and have us sing, repeating what he had sung. That way we learned the songs. He called them the *Psalms of Ascent*. He said that these are the songs that the congregation sings on their journey up to Jerusalem for the Feasts. At a fork in the road, we met with another family going to Jerusalem and we sang together. Then another family joined us, and another. Before long we were 100 strong, singing and praising Adonai on our way to the Feast. The closer we got, the bigger the "choir" became.

How glorious it was when we reached the golden gate! There must have been a thousand of us lifting up our voices, singing, "Hallelu Yah, all you servants of Adonai who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise Adonai. Adonai, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion."

That was the first time I went with Abba, singing on our way up to Feasts in Jerusalem. Today, I anxiously, but eagerly look to the hills myself. "121, Adonai, 121."

Lord, today I will take my family up to Jerusalem to worship you at the Feast of Tabernacles. How excited I am, but...I lift my eyes to hills...I think of all the dangers that potentially await us there: narrow, slippery paths,...treacherous cliffs...wild, hungry animals...robbers hiding, waiting to attack anyone that might pass by...

Where does my help come from against all these dangers? My help comes from you, Yahweh, the covenant God, the Maker of heaven and earth! You made it all. You will protect us.

As we climb and wind along those treacherous paths, you won't let our foot slip—You are always watching, never sleeping—You care not only for me and my family, but for all Israel!

The sun will burn hot as we travel, the night brings its own dangers, but You are our Provider; You will provide us with shade.

You, LORD God, are our Protector. You will protect us on the way to Jerusalem and on the way back home. We can trust You wholly because You always protect us.

Now read Psalm 121. The last five short paragraphs above are basically a paraphrase of that psalm. The story prepared my hearers to learn about the passage.

We don't have space here to deal in detail with the Psalms of Ascent, but suffice it to say that they were a set of 15 psalms that the Israelites would sing on their way up to Jerusalem to worship. If you were already familiar with the psalms of ascent, you probably noticed several teaching points as you read the story. Can you see how telling a carefully crafted midrash like this can pave the way in your teaching on a given passage as you disciple someone?

Why not try it? Here is a quick little outline to start crafting a midrash.

Telling a carefully crafted midrash can pave the way in your teaching on a given passage as you disciple someone or preach to a group.

1. Determine what point you want to make from a given Bible passage you will teach your disciple,
2. Research well,
3. Craft the story *being faithful to the Bible text*.
4. Practice your story!

I challenge you to write a midrash. It's fun. And it grabs the attention of disciples, preparing their hearts for teaching. Try it and let me know how it goes.

In discussing the use of story in evangelism and discipleship, we have cited biblical examples (Jesus, Stephen, and Nathan) and Jewish examples (midrashim). Another example comes from a growing movement in missions called the International Orality Network (ION).

The Example of the International Orality Network (ION)

These leaders from mission organizations, training schools, and other ministry organizations encourage the telling of Bible stories. They differentiate (and rightly so) between Bible story *teaching* and Bible story *telling*. When we teach the Bible we normally seek to analyze, summarize, make conclusions, and apply the story to the lives of our students. The Orality Network encourages the *telling* of the story and letting the story do the work. That doesn't mean we don't ask questions. Quite the opposite is true as we will show below. However, emphasis is on the story itself and allowing students to make the conclusions and applications themselves.

In oral cultures telling Bible stories is an excellent way to evangelize and disciple especially in the early stages in any given location before literacy training takes place, because people can't read.

After telling a Bible story, ION proponents (and others) will ask at least four or five questions like the ones listed below to get learners interacting with the story and with each other. Not only do the questions help the hearers apply the story to their lives, but because many times the people are oral learners (they don't read or write), the interaction and repetition of the story helps them to truly learn the story so it can be told again; passed on to others.

Simply tell the story (after having studied and practiced it) and ask:

“What did you like about that story?”

“What didn't you like?” or “What bothered you about that story?”

“What did you learn about God?”

“What did you learn about yourself?” etc.

In oral cultures this is an excellent way to evangelize and disciple especially in the early stages in any given location before literacy training takes place, because people can't read the Bible or any other book. However, many are finding this methodology to be effective in secondary oral learning situations as well. Secondary oral learners are those who know how to read and write (They may even have college degrees!), but they *choose* to learn orally now. Many people today don't read another book after they graduate from college.

The Story of Hope is a great tool you can use to tell the Bible's story. Related resources can also help:

- Visuals (laminated or non-laminated 10" x 12" picture cards (Use with small groups.)
- Cell phone images (Use on a bus, plane—anywhere you are with an individual.)
- ChronoBridge Cards (Use with an individual or small group to tell abbreviated stories.)
- *The Story of Hope* powerpoint (Use in a larger group with computer and/or video projector.)

(These and other resources can be found at <http://www.goodsoil.com/resources>)

Telling Bible stories and asking questions can be an effective way to evangelize and disciple. Try it! You might like it.

Examples of Stories I've Used

Besides the biblical examples, the Jewish example of midrashim, and the ION example of using stories, let me share a few more that have helped me. Hopefully, this should be a very practical section. I will **not** wax eloquent. Instead, I will try to briefly describe situations and let you imagine how they worked or look up others online.

1. *Teaching (group discipleship here) on the Psalms of Ascent, Psalm 126.* Please read the psalm now and note how the psalmist dreamed of going back to the land from exile. Then, when they arrived back in the land, it was as if they were still dreaming. I wrote and shared this very short story first, but it set the stage for how the psalmist felt and reacted.

Jennifer was dreaming. In her dream, she was getting married to Jeff. Everything was so beautiful—the flowers, the candles, her bridesmaids—and Jeff looked so handsome as he looked into her eyes and said, “I do.”

And so while she slept, she smiled because her dream was so wonderful.

Then she woke up...

...and her smile became a giggle and then a laugh—it wasn't just a dream! Yesterday she had married Jeff and they would begin their life together today.

2. *Establishing the importance of dependence on Jesus alone and not other people who may or may not let you down or simply may not always be there (people die).* In different settings I told two different stories.
 - a. I told the story of Obi-wan Kenobe and Luke Skywalker trying to escape the death star in “Star Wars.” When Obiwan dies at Darth Vader's light saber, Luke cries, “No!!” But he must continue. He must get on the Millennium Falcon or Obi-wan would have died in vain. Told well, this can be very moving and transitions well into the Bible passage.
 - b. In another case, I told the story of Gandalf fighting the Balrog in “The Fellowship of the Ring” by Tolkien. Again, when Gandalf, hanging on the edge of the cliff, says, “Fly, you fools!” just before he falls, it is to emphasize their need of continuing on without him so his death would not be in vain.

These are both emotional stories which, told well, will get your point across. I used 1 Chronicles 28 (David passing off the scene, but challenging Solomon and the leaders to continue) as my discipleship text in this case.

These two stories are a good transition for moving on to video clips. Why? Because I want you to know that I am firm believer in using video clips—both from popular movies and clips made specifically for Christian teaching—BUT you don't want clips to be your default mode. In above discipleship settings I've used the clips *and* I've told the stories. Invariably, it has seemed to me that people are more wide-eyed-on-the-edge-of-their-seats with me *when I tell the story rather than when I show the clip*.

I asked myself why that was. You would think that Hollywood, with the special effects and all that goes into a film to grip people and hang on to them, would be more effective. But it is not always the case. I think that the reason is this: When I tell the story, I am directing their attention to specific ideas, emotions, etc. When I show the clip, as beautiful as it is, the audience can go in many directions in their thoughts, many of which are not the point on which I want them to concentrate. Anyways, before you show a clip, think through it. Would it be more effective to tell the story yourself? Try it.

*People are more wide-eyed-on-the-edge-of-their-seats with me **when I tell the story rather than when I show the clip.***

3. *"A Man Fell in a Hole"* This three-minute clip is great for evangelism of people from worldviews that may be quite different from yours (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, etc.). In it a man who has fallen into a hole and can't get out (illustrating his lost, sinful condition) is challenged by people from different worldviews. Only one can and does get him out of the hole. Available from www.bluefishtv.com, this clip can be used one-on-one or in a group to open a variety of possible conversion discussions.
4. *"Free Throw"* (also available through bluefishtv) is a short story based on an unfamiliar rule in basketball that challenges believers to step up to their responsibility. It can be used to teach and challenge your disciple(s) about whatever responsibility with which you are dealing.

These are just a few examples of stories I use in evangelism and discipleship. People like stories. Stories communicate truth and challenge us to change. Once again I will say: Try it! Telling stories could make a difference in *your* evangelism and discipleship.