

## Unleashing the Gospel - Telling Our Story

Everybody loves a good story. I enjoy a good story - A recent book I have read is *The Rosie Project* – not a Christian book but a great story. I also enjoy reading to kids, specially little kids, and if you do it well, you will hear those magic words, “read it again, read it again”. Good stories stimulate our imagination and captivate our attention. They're a powerful way to communicate and I don't think we ever outgrow them.

The Bible is full of stories. It's basically story after story after story. And rarely do the authors stop to tell us the point of their stories. Instead, they just tell us another story.

Donald Miller the author of a great little book *Blue Like Jazz* says, sometimes people to come to a bible story from some “interesting” angles when trying to figure out what the author means. Like when David slays Goliath with five smooth stones. Donald goes on to say, Over the years some people have got a little carried away in their interpretation and say things like the five smooth stones represent faith, hope, love, tithe and tithe and if we have faith, hope love and tithe (twice), we'll slay the Goliaths in our lives as well. So let's take an offering!

Stories are powerful. Jesus knew that, he shrink wrapped profound lessons of wisdom and heavy duty theology into very simple stories. It is argued that Jesus was the greatest storyteller who ever walked the planet.

- He told stories about great banquets and small mustard seeds, trees that bore fruit and missing sheep and lost coins.
- He told stories about business owners and farmers sowing seed and good shepherds and lost sons and shrewd managers and feisty widows and poor beggars.

And the cool thing is that all of his stories somehow, ultimately pointed to God's bigger story, which we can sometimes lose sight of.

Every one of us has a story. And one of the greatest "ahha moments" we can ever have in life is when we realize that our story fits into God's story which is the greatest story ever told.

That's what Jesus wants us to see. He wants us to see

- That we're like the lost son who can be found.
- That we can be good soil that produces a crop thirty, sixty, even hundred fold.
- That we are loved and cared for by the Good Shepherd.

- That our mustard seed of faith can move mountains and
- That one day we'll sit down and dine with Jesus at the great banquet in the kingdom.

We can argue and debate about some of the interpretations of these stories but ultimately the stories Jesus told are meant to connect us to God's bigger story.

- That we can be forgiven.
- That we can be healed.
- That we can be renewed.
- That we can be transformed.
- That we can be set free.
- That we can have abundant life.
- That we can live forever.

Have you ever taken the time to think through your story? If someone asked you why God is so important in your life, or why are you a Christian, could you share your story with them in 1 minute or 2?

When I was youth pastoring I would occasionally put one of my leaders on the spot in a youth service and ask them why they are a Christian? They had to give an answer, without jargon, that was clear, simple and honest for them. And sometimes I would play the sceptical non-christian and challenge them on some of their answers - it got them really thinking.

Matt why are you a Christian?

Well hopefully by the end of this message you'll have some idea how you might respond to that question.

This morning we continue our series called *Unleashing the Gospel* with a message I've called "Telling Our Story." Last week I said that **evangelism is cooperating with the Holy Spirit to help a person move one step closer to Jesus.**

And as we talked about a while back, if we're cooperating with the Spirit by **listening well and loving without strings attached** we will have opportunities to share our story and when that time comes we want to be ready.

As I said stories are powerful. Some of us have dramatic stories about how we came to Christ out of some pretty rough backgrounds and those stories need to be told. But most of us have common, simple, everyday stories.

Some of us came to Christ at a young age and our stories aren't dramatic at all. In fact, we can hardly remember a time when we didn't believe in Jesus, but they're still powerful and need to be shared because think about it - the same grace of God that dramatically rescues us, is the same grace of God that dramatically protects us from throwing our lives away. Grace is both corrective and protective.

I am sure you have heard it said "The sceptic may deny our doctrine or attack our church, but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that our life has been changed by Jesus."

Now before I give you some tips on how to tell your story, let me first tell you what not to share.

In his book *Just Walk Across the Room* Bill Hybels tells the story of being in airport one day when he was approached by a guy that wanted to "save his soul". (**Tip1**, never use the term "save your soul" "redeemed", washed in the Blood of the lamb" Even God's grace needs to be defined, **think about the words you use**)

Anyway Bill didn't tell him that he was pastor he played along ready to be the guys next conversion project. (Gay will never let me do that with street preachers, she tells me it is not nice, deceptive – she's so sensitive)

Anyway Bill says this guy started out with a bang. "Hey Mister, you're never gonna believe this! One night, God woke me up! And I looked at the alarm clock and it said 2:22. And then the next night, God woke me up again and this time it was 3:33. And then the next night ..." And Bill said, "Wait a minute! Let me guess. It was 4:44." And the guy said, "Yeah. How did you know that?"

Hybels writes, "In that moment, I had only one question run through my mind. Why? Why? Why? Why do people share this kind of stuff in those delicate, first few minutes of an interaction? Why do they roll out some spiritually freakish thing as the anchor point for a conversation with someone they don't know? Why?"

"Weird God Stories," Hybels says. "Oddities of life that many Christians will agree are neither coincidental nor explainable other than in terms of God. Most of us have them. But do I really need to tell the slightly weird story to perfect strangers?"

**Tip2: Don't start your faith story with the strangest experience you've ever had with God.** Save that for later. Way later."

So when we're talking about sharing our stories, we are not telling them they are lost and need to be saved by the blood of the lamb and we're not sharing some weird, freakish God story, even if we have one, because hopefully that's not why we're following Jesus.

We're talking about the difference that Jesus has made in our life because the gospel is all about transformation and life change. That's the story we want to tell others.

Tip 3: Tell them about the difference Jesus has made.

In other words,

- what was our life like before we met Jesus,
- how did we meet Jesus, and
- what's our life like since we met Jesus?

Three simple hooks on which to hang your story.

A good example is found in Acts 26 when the Apostle Paul tells his story. He's standing before King Agrippa who gives him one chance to speak and what does Paul do with that one chance? He tells his story.

If you have a Bible turn to Acts 26:1-23,

**26** Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You may speak in your defence.”

So Paul, gesturing with his hand, started his defence: <sup>2</sup>“I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defence today against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, <sup>3</sup>for I know you are an expert on all Jewish customs and controversies. Now please listen to me patiently!

Notice that Paul doesn't enter into all the controversies and arguments of which King Agrippa is well aware. Instead, he tells his story and starts with his life before he met Christ.

verses 4,

<sup>4</sup>“As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. <sup>6</sup>Now I am on trial because of my hope in the fulfilment of God’s promise made to our ancestors. <sup>7</sup>In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel zealously

worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, Your Majesty, they accuse me for having this hope! <sup>8</sup> Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?

<sup>9</sup> “I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus the Nazarene. <sup>10</sup> Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem. Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. <sup>11</sup> Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.

Put simply, Paul was zealous for God and did everything he could to oppose the name of Jesus. He was focused - obsessed with hunting down and destroying followers of Jesus ... until he became one. Then he moves to the second part of his story. And that's how he met Christ. And in Paul's case it was dramatic. Look at verses 12-18,

<sup>12</sup> “One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. <sup>13</sup> About noon, Your Majesty, as I was on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. <sup>14</sup> We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.’

<sup>15</sup> “‘Who are you, lord?’ I asked.

“And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup> Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. You are to tell the world what you have seen and what I will show you in the future. <sup>17</sup> And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God’s people, who are set apart by faith in me.’

Some of you will be thinking, “back the truck up Brian”, this is a weird God story. Paul met Christ face to face, he was thrown off his horse and blinded by the light. “That’s not normal, Brian, Paul broke your rule?”

Look I can’t comment too much on the context of Paul, maybe in his culture, what he experienced wasn’t so weird. Certainly I know that in a lot of Asian cultures today God reveals himself in dreams and visions, some cultures are

more open to those types of stories, some individuals are open to those types of stories, I don't know? What I do know is for a lot of kiwis today, if you tell them a weird God story before they know that you are a normal human being, they will switch off, stop listening and write you off as loopy. You can debate that particular tip with me later.

Anyway listen to how Paul describes his life since he met Christ.

Look at verses 19-23,

<sup>19</sup>“And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven. <sup>20</sup>I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do. <sup>21</sup>Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. <sup>22</sup>But God has protected me right up to this present time so I can testify to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen— <sup>23</sup>that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike.”

That's Paul's story. Yes it's a dramatic one. And it hangs on these three hooks. Before. How. And Since. And it has a theme. The theme is Paul's whole hearted passion. He was zealous for God before he met Jesus and then his zeal for God was channelled in a new direction after he met Jesus. It became his life's mission to convince Jews and Gentiles alike to follow Christ and through his writings, which make up most of the New Testament, he's convinced me and many of us.

Now what's your story?

- What was your life like before you met Jesus?
- How did you meet Jesus?
- And what's your life been like since you've met Jesus?

Maybe you can identify a theme as well, maybe lostness or the need for acceptance or fear or self-destructive behaviour.

I want to finish with a couple of examples of real life stories that you may be able to identify with.

"For years, I felt lost inside. I had a hole that I needed to fill, so I searched for things that could fill that hole: friends, new clothes, a job, a husband ... My emptiness would be filled for a short time, but I never found the 'it' that kept the hole filled. One day I went to church with a friend and heard a message about having a relationship with Jesus. Once I

understood, accepted, and grew in my relationship with him, my emptiness was gone - for good. Today, I have a sense of satisfaction."

"I used to look for acceptance. I used alcohol to make me feel like I was somebody. I thought God had put me here as a cruel joke. But then I met Jesus. He helped me deal with my alcohol issues, and he made me feel worthwhile. I now know what happiness is actually like. The void in my heart is gone. I now know I have many reasons for being here ... one is to share my story to give others hope. My days are no longer miserable. Life actually means something to me now."

Two simple, but powerful stories. And that's the key. Keep it clear and not loaded up with religious clichés or code words. And keep it brief. Each one of these stories contains 100 words or less. Give the person you're talking to a chance to ask questions and leave them wanting more. You can always share more.

Now what about those of us who came to Christ as children, like I did. We don't have too much "juicy stuff" to share about our lives before we met Jesus?

My story goes something like this.

I grew up in a Christian family, I wasn't a bad kid but I did have a bit of a questioning spirit, I was more mischievous/adventurous than rebellious. I made some sort of commitment at age 12, I had got in to minor shop lifting and stuff like that, I was challenged at church and wanted to change. Age 16 was another time when I was challenged by God, I decided I was a hypocrite, I needed to either be in or out – I chose in. I still had a questioning spirit then (and still do now) so I continue to grow in my faith. I don't have all the answers, but in all my questioning I am still convinced that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

130 words. Simple. Clear. And brief. Nothing earth shattering. Not a #1 best seller, not a made for TV movie. But that's my story of what Jesus did for me. And I could talk a long time about the way Jesus has blessed me and guided my life and done more for me than I could ever ask or imagine. And I could tell one or two weird God's stories too. But if someone asked me why I am a Christian that's what I'd tell them.

So now it's your turn. If this was a workshop, I'd have us all take the next half-hour to work on our stories, but's it not a workshop. So instead, I have an homework for all of you. I want you to go home this week and write out your story in 150 words or less, if possible around one theme. And then I want you to email it to me. My email address is [brian@obc.org.nz](mailto:brian@obc.org.nz)

And then in a couple of weeks we're going to take a Sunday to share some of your stories with the church. You can share your own story or you can have someone else share, over to you.

And if you don't have a story to tell yet about what Jesus has done in your life, that's okay. I want you to think about that. And if you want to talk about that, email me as well because I believe that God wants all of us to have story that includes his love, grace, and forgiveness.