

## Chapter 1 The Power of Story

*They sat spellbound in the darkness, hardly breathing. A few were occasionally nibbling popcorn while most just stared. The screen had transported them into a new reality. Left behind was the ho-hum, the mundane, the everyday; they were swept up into a world of excitement, adventure, intrigue, and romance.*

*They had entered the theater as individuals with impassive expressions. But now they were one, a group that swayed and played with the drama, faces open and eager. Anger, joy, love, hate, fear, excitement—a multitude of emotions were being shared together as the moviegoers became one with the screen. They laughed and cried as they went places never before traversed. Things were as they should be—wrongs were made right, evil was punished, justice was served, loyalty was rewarded, love was shared, the impossible was overcome.*

*They had come, not to escape from life but to experience it. Lifted above meaninglessness, they were now elevated into something higher, something for which their spirits yearned. Life was springing to new meaning in the safety of their seats.*

Hollywood has captured the power of story. Audiences identify with the movie, locate themselves in the story, and connect with its significance.

Long before Hollywood, Jesus got the power of story. Case in point: Jesus healed a demon-possessed man, who then wanted to follow Him. Instead of allowing it, Jesus told him to stay home and tell his friends what God had done for him. (See Mark 5:1-20.) Even though the people of the region initially rejected Jesus, He knew their hearts would change simply by the power of this man's story.

God has always used stories to convey His message to the world. Much of the Bible is narrative. Scripture has used the histories of biblical characters to inspire people for centuries. This is why God is also writing a story with your life. Like a masterful screenwriter, He is crafting your journey in such a way that when you recount it, others will be revitalized in their faith.

Sometimes life becomes so mundane that we lose perspective on our way. The story gets to feeling interminable. My main objective in writing this book, therefore, is to strengthen your grip on the divine purpose of your story. God has been with you all along—even in the dry seasons—crafting a fascinating history with the timeline of your life. He wants to see you through to the end.

### **Visa Application**

Those who write stories have the ability, through the power of their art, to shape the values and convictions of nations and generations.

I was reminded of this truth while applying recently for a tourist visa. Invited to teach in a nation where Christians are often persecuted for their faith, I needed to apply for a visa in a manner that would not reveal the religious nature of my mission. In the process of completing the application, I came to the line where I was supposed to list my occupation. I knew instinctively that I should not indicate I am a gospel preacher. *Author*—that seemed innocuous enough to me. So that's what I wrote down, and sent the application off to an American agency that helps with my visa applications.

A couple days later, an agency rep called to say that if I put *author* on the application it would be declined automatically. That government, they informed us, does not want authors or lawyers visiting their nation.

I thought author was a neutral occupation and was initially surprised to discover they perceived it as dangerous. But upon reflection, it made sense. Stories are catalytic, and can pose a threat to repressive governments that do not want people to think for themselves or to form politically incorrect beliefs. Authors craft stories, and stories are transforming.

That exchange with the visa agency heightened my awareness of the power that resides in having a great story and sharing it with someone else.

## **Stories Go Down Easy**

One reason stories are so powerful is because they have a way of bypassing people's defenses and winning their hearts.

This is what happened when the New Testament church hit into what was perhaps the thorniest theological issue they would have to face. It was the problem of the Gentiles. How could Gentiles possibly be included in the church of Jesus Christ? The Jews had both an anti-Gentile theology and anti-Gentile sentiments. Anyone who even hinted at acceptance of Gentiles would be met with a blast of antagonism and hostility.

You can see the volatile emotions that boiled near the surface when this issue came up.

Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" (Acts 11:1-3).

Some of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem had problems doctrinally with the fact that Peter ate with uncircumcised Gentiles. They were ready to fight. God knew the Jewish believers would need help with this super-heated issue. One option was to give Peter supernatural insight into the Scriptures on the topic, and then Peter could hold a teaching symposium in Jerusalem for all the Jews. If he led a comprehensive, three-week study, he might be able to get the main players on board, and from there the huge ship might begin to make a slow turn toward the Gentiles.

Instead, it's as though God said, "Let's make it easier for them. Let's help them. Let's give it to them in a story." By turning the whole thing into a story, God bypassed all the wrangling and theological objections that would have most certainly ensued.

So when Peter was accosted by the Jewish believers in Jerusalem about eating with uncircumcised men, he simply told his story.

But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me" (Acts 11:4-5).

From there, he went on to tell how the voice from heaven told him not to call unclean anything that God had cleansed. Then the three men arrived, and Peter went with them to Caesarea. While preaching to the Gentiles there, the Holy Spirit suddenly fell on them and they all began to speak in tongues and magnify God.

Peter did not tell Cornelius's version of the narrative (which we have in Acts 10). In fact, he didn't even mention Cornelius's name. He simply told the account as he himself experienced it. He knew the story wouldn't convince anyone if he told Cornelius's version; it would hold power only as he told his own side of the story.

How did the Jewish believers respond? Amazingly swiftly. "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'" (Acts 11:18).

Twenty minutes of story did more to win their hearts than three weeks of fiery debate would have.

Herein lies the power of story: It bypasses defenses and melts resistance. And this is why God will give *you* a story to tell. It can soften antagonistic skeptics and win them to the love and wisdom of God.

Stories also have the power to convince people in ways that straightforward, didactic teaching cannot always accomplish. We see this in the life of the apostle Paul.

### **Paul's Damascus Road Encounter**

Paul (named Saul at the time) made his way to Damascus to arrest those who believed in Christ and haul them back to Jerusalem. There was nothing unusual about that day, he was just going about his business. As he approached the city, it's as though Jesus said, "Saul, get ready. I'm about to give you a good story."

Truly, Paul's Damascus road encounter had all the ingredients of an outstanding story. He was knocked to the ground, beheld the face of Christ, and had an audible conversation with Jesus Himself. The light was so bright that Paul was blinded and needed others to lead him by the hand. Those who were with him saw the light, but couldn't see the Lord nor distinguish His words. For three days and nights he neither ate nor drank. Then, as though scales fell from his eyes, his sight was miraculously restored. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized in water, and commissioned as an apostolic herald to the Gentiles.

The whole story is *so* dramatic!

And when you follow Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, you find him telling this experience over and over again. Why? Because there's *power* on a good story.

Paul's Damascus road story had the kind of power on it that enabled those who could not grasp the message of the gospel to wrap their fingers around something in the kingdom and lay hold of their eternal destiny. Where gospel principles did not penetrate, the dazzling screenplay of a true episode could pierce the darkness and reach a needy heart.

God still does the same today. He writes stories with our lives that have such power on them that seekers can get a handle on the meaning of the gospel. A way is made for those who could not otherwise find their way.

What we need today, more than ever, are men and women with stories in God that are so compelling that they shift eternal destinies.

It's interesting to follow how Paul used his testimony. Whenever he found himself in front of a particularly tough crowd, he would pull out his Damascus road story. Why? Because it had power on it to defuse animosity and win the hearts of skeptics.

*Jesus, write a Damascus-caliber story with my life.*