

The Church

God's Called Out People



Matthew Allen

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By Matthew Allen

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Why This Study?

- To realize just how precious the church is
- To understand we are part of something bigger than ourselves
- To understand God's purpose for you in the church
- To know what the future holds for the church

Lesson 1

Your Story Is His Story

The Greatest Story Ever Told

What's your story?

How did you get to here, to this exact moment?

Stories have a unique power.¹ They capture us and enthrall us in ways that facts, information, and systems can't. A story organizes events into a sequence that can be followed and understood. Stories often contain morals and lessons that teach us about universal truths of life. They help us to make sense of reality and confront the chaos of our fallen world. Sometimes hearing a good story can erase a frown, clear confusion, or compel us to act when we are frozen by fear, doubt, or other afflictions.

In the church, we often refer to the gospel of Jesus as “the greatest story ever told.” It most certainly is. The effect that stories can have on people is often profound and sometimes even life-changing. This is absolutely the case regarding Christians and our relationship to the gospel or the “good news” of Jesus. In the character of Jesus, we see all of God's character reflected and distilled into one central point, wrapped in human flesh. In Christ, we see a humble servant and God himself at the same time. He is ultimately relatable and yet, simultaneously perfectly holy.

As we follow Christ, the power of the sacrifice of Jesus and how He conquered death echoes throughout our own experiences and reminds us that we can be more than conquerors. We see ourselves in the story of Jesus. We see our sin and redemption intersecting at the cross. In the person of Jesus, we are simultaneously challenged to reach up to a higher standard and yet we find comfort that even though we fail, we can always receive mercy. This from a God who loves us so much that He would give his life for us.

Identity in the Character of Jesus

Every story has heroes and villains, as well as major and minor characters. Sometimes we're not sure where we fit into the story of creation. Perhaps

¹ Please note that the first lesson has been written in a very personal way, direct to the reader. This is by design. We pray it will stir you and encourage you.

we fear we are nothing but background characters—maybe, in the grand scheme of things, we really don’t matter. We may think our story isn’t too amazing.

“Who am I? I’m nobody.”

Yet, this is not how we are regarded by Christ and by the Father: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*, John 3.16.

Try substituting “the world” with “me.”

For God so loved *me*, that he gave his only Son, that *I* could believe in him and not perish but have eternal life.

If you are in Christ, there is nothing about your story that is insignificant or unimportant to God. Your story is now part of the family history of God’s people. We may identify with our past sins, hang-ups, or struggles. We may also identify with our accomplishments, job titles or role in society. We may even be tempted to compare ourselves to others or wish for a different story than the one we have. God sees a bigger picture than that. To Him, your story matters.

If you are in Christ, the arc of your story has now curved heavenward. It began the moment your sins were washed away.² In Christ, there is a new and higher identity. You are God’s chosen. You are kept and called to a higher purpose of love, service, and praise. You are a disciple of the good teacher and sheep in the flock of the good shepherd. Your struggles are now and will forever be turned over to the might and power of Jesus Christ. *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*, 2 Peter 1.9.

Tell Your Story

My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge, Psalm 71.15. Christians who grew up in the church and lived a “normal” church kid’s life sometimes feel like their walk with Jesus isn’t special or inspirational. Christians who grew up outside of church, or others who departed from Jesus early and left the church behind may feel like they are not good enough for God. They often feel

2 See Acts 22.16.

shame over their past. The truth is this—the background is irrelevant. The most powerful evidence for the supremacy of Christ is a redeemed life. This is something every Christian possesses. Therefore, we ought to praise God for weaving the story that He has in our own lives.

It is not self-centered to share the story of your walk with God, so long as the focus is placed exactly where it belongs. Telling the story of how you came to Christ and what that meant for you may just inspire another to do the very same. If enough people declare the righteousness of God in enough places, then we have a movement. Then we have an Acts of the Apostles sort of culture in our churches. That's why you should tell your story. It might inspire someone. It might encourage them to take that next step of faith.

As such, below are a collection of short stories of the conversions of real people who gave their lives to Christ.³

Mike's Story

Mike grew up going to churches here and there, but never really had a relationship with God until he came across someone at work who stood out to him as an example of Christian conduct. No matter how hard this man was pressured at work to swear or curse, he never would. Mike finally asked him "Why?" His coworker responded with the words of Jesus, Mark 7.15: *"There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."*

From there, Mike began studying the word with his coworker. Mike got into the Scriptures and started to reorient his life. He thought hard about who he was and where he was going with his life. Eventually he ended up visiting a congregation in suburban Dayton, Ohio, where he met people who welcomed him and showed him kindness. Several months later, Mike and his wife were baptized into Christ after having a Bible study with some of the members there.

Mike went back to work and started to realize he was standing out for the same reason as his friend who originally invited him to church, for better or worse. He admitted he was not perfect, but his outlook on life had changed forever. Knowing there's a long road ahead, he continues to press on every

3 These are all retellings, and as such have paraphrases and addendum to the original recorded interviews from which these stories were taken.

day to be more like Jesus. Mike is currently, at the time of writing, a deacon in the Lord's church.

"Now I realize I fail, and I can ask forgiveness, wake up the next day and start fresh ... Knowing that I sin and what he did for me for those sins ... I know he loves me so much, and I could never repay him with the love that I have."

Kyle's Story

Kyle grew up in the church but wasn't baptized until he was an adult and in college. His father and grandfather were both Christians and he grew up spending every Sunday in church. It took getting out into the world and seeing how it was to move him to decide to commit to Christ. He had put off baptism until college when, in 2006, he was baptized by his grandfather. Through a rough first couple of years, he struggled with certain "old ways" that had been left behind but ultimately pressed through those struggles.

Now, Christ's sacrifice is a recurring thought for him that keeps pressing him on. Kyle has a background in the military, so the concept of sacrifice resonates strongly with him. Now, internalizing the willingness of Christ to endure that pain and suffering of the cross for all mankind undergirds and continually motivates Kyle's walk. The man-made answers of the world didn't satisfy him. God as a basis is where Kyle has placed his faith. For Kyle, God is a "strong, concrete foundation," for himself and for his family.

"Christ is a foundation for life."

Amanda's Story

Amanda has been a Christian for more than 27 years. She was raised in a faithful Christian home and eventually baptized at eleven years old. For her, it was a simple mustard-seed sized faith that motivated her to stop her parents in the parking lot to tell them that she wanted to be baptized that night. The next day, she felt like she was "shining from the inside out." Her faith has continually grown and changed since then.

Now, Jesus has colored every aspect of her life. Having that relationship with Jesus and being a part of the family of God has found its way into all her family and work relationships. Jesus has been with her through moves throughout the country, starting a family, struggles with depression and countless other twists and turns. She is a dedicated servant who involves herself in every way possible with the life of the church.

"Christ was always there . . . He was the reason that Chris and I continued to work hard in our marriage. There are a lot of things in my life that probably would have fallen apart without Jesus and the people he sends into our lives . . ."

Jim's Story

Nearing 70 years of faithfulness to Christ, Jim was baptized into Christ in 1952. As he was being apprenticed to become an electrician, he was assigned to a mentor who influenced him for Christ. Jim had some church background but for the most part, hadn't had any sort of relationship with God. One day he was approached by some relatives about baptizing his children. When Jim shared this conversation with the man who was mentoring him at work, he responded, "What do those children believe?"

That spurred a series of new questions and conversations. Every free minute on the job, that fellow shared Jesus' teachings with Jim. He shared with him about believer's baptism. Jim and his wife, Vera, eventually had the man in their home for a Bible study where they all dove into the Bible together over a course of many weeks. He continually kept inviting them to church.

Eventually, Jim and Vera attended a church of Christ in the town where they were. They had questions about the singing, communion, and several other practices. A few things stood out to them. It wasn't long before they were being invited to social gatherings with the members of the church there. Jim described being impressed with their conduct and their attitude of kindness and holiness.

After hearing enough preaching and teaching, and spending time with those Christians, it came to the moment that Jim and Vera were ready to turn their lives over to Jesus. The invitation was given one Sunday morning, and after Bible study and prayer, they went forward and were baptized into Christ. He and Vera enjoyed many years of a loving marriage and service to God together before she went home to be with the Lord. To this day, their children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren continue to carry the banner of the cross. Out of this legacy have come elders, preachers, teachers, and dedicated servants of the Lord.

"I not only have a good physical family, but a large percentage of them are also a part of my spiritual family . . . and that gives me comfort. I intend and pray that when I leave this world, that I will be in line to receive that same gift that I'm confident Vera's given."

For Thought and Reflection

1. Why are stories so powerful?
2. What makes a good story?
3. What is the gospel?
4. How does the gospel fit into the story of your life?
5. How can sharing your story with others help them get to know Jesus?
Why should we tell our own story?

Lesson 2

The Magnitude of Your Salvation

Coming to Appreciate What You Have Been Given in Christ

Introduction

Hear. Believe. Repent. Confess. Be Baptized. These steps of salvation have been something you may have heard from your earliest of years.

What are the five acts of worship? If you answer singing, preaching, prayer, giving, and partaking of the Lord's Supper, you'd be correct.

What is the work of the church? Evangelism, edification, and benevolence summarizes it point by point.

It is probably safe to say that those in and around the churches of Christ over the last century are familiar with these lists. And perhaps, maybe you've heard these systems of salvation, worship, and work taught in comparison with denominational practices, sometimes with the impression being left that those with differing viewpoints have bad hearts and are willfully being dishonest with Scripture. Our system is so easy to see, *why can't others see it?*

Summarizing biblical doctrine in such succinct manners is not always bad. They are good points to emphasize. However, there is the need that we see these matters not just from the perspective of being part of a system that differentiates us from other believers in the religious world, but rather as a heartfelt response to an amazing God who has gone out of His way to save us from eternity's fire. A heavy concentration on a *system* or *procedure* can have drawbacks. Religion is not only a matter of logic. Bringing others to salvation is not just about winning convincing arguments and using powerful words. Evangelistic outreach involves the head *and* the heart.

The heart. An emotional connection to Jesus. Think of how many people who are, year in and year out, led to the baptistry. We rejoice with them as they exit the water... then we never see them again. What happened? Could it be that we did a good job making a logical connection in convincing them to respond to a system, but somewhere along the line we failed in making a connection to their heart? Having an emotional connection to Jesus and the salvation He provides is something we must all help facilitate with every lost

person who is considering repentance and baptism.

It doesn't matter if you've just become a Christian, or if you have been one for many years, it is of vital importance to grasp the significance of your salvation. At the time of your baptism, you may not have fully understood the entire magnitude of your decision, but your heart should have been touched by God's extreme love and work in reestablishing the relationship you lost after sin invaded your life.

The Magnitude of Stepping Into the Light

Over the course of my life, I've had the opportunity to visit several caves administered and protected by the National Park Service as well as some in various state parks around the country. A few that I've visited are Blanchard Springs in Arkansas, Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, Ohio Caverns in ... Ohio, and Jewell Cave in South Dakota. They're all reasonably safe, well lit, and full of stairs. As you traverse the cave, you are always under the watchful eye of a park ranger. They make sure to point out all the points of interest along the way. The beauty is amazing. They are all special in their own unique way. On every tour I've ever been, the ranger is sure to stop the group at the deepest point and turn off the lights. If you've never been inside a cave with no lighting, it is hard to imagine the gravity of the darkness. The feeling you have can be overwhelming. There is always relief when the lights come back on.

The one wild cave I've been in is on the western slope of the Black Hills, known as Bear Trap Cave. It's a completely different experience from the well-manicured and supervised National Park Caves. Rather than an expansive door to walk through or elevator to go down, this journey begins by dropping down into a hole out in the middle of a burned-out forest, 50 miles from the nearest town. Once inside, a person must crouch as they walk back about 20 feet before going down a steep incline to a very large room that has at least a 40-foot ceiling. There is no lighting. The path is full of rocks and jagged boulders. As you descend into the large room, there is a cliff off to the left with jagged rocks and boulders on the floor below. The gravel is like walking on marbles. Its treacherous. You would never want to go into this place by yourself. And, unlike the National Park Caves, this is just a hole in the ground ... there is not much beauty inside.

A few years ago, a friend of mine ventured into Bear Trap Cave for the first time ... alone. After he got in so far, his flashlight went out, and before he knew it, he had stumbled over the cliff falling to the floor 40 feet below. He was knocked out. After coming to, lying on the floor of this giant room in great pain and having difficulty breathing, my friend spent the first few minutes preparing to die. He had several broken ribs and ankle. There was no light. He had no clue on how to get out. No one knew where he was. It was winter and could have been weeks before anyone would have come upon his truck parked topside. He figured he had reached the end of the line. He thought of his family and the trauma they would soon be going through. He was angry at himself for getting in this situation. He prayed. He prayed some more.

After what seemed like hours, he crawled, in total darkness, a few feet over to touch and feel his way out ... hopefully finding a way leading up. When he got around a large crevice, to his great relief, was a ray of light emanating from the cave entrance a hundred feet away. As he continued to crawl around, he finally found the way back up and followed the light. Brighter and brighter, it became. Finally, he was able to get himself out of the cave and drive himself to the hospital. Prayers answered.

After such an experience can you imagine what it would be like to come up to the top and get back into the daylight? That magnitude of the moment would be something you'd never forget. You'd never forget the feeling. A hopeless situation was now one of deliverance. Now there is the opportunity to embrace a second chance at life. Emotional? Absolutely.

Now, let's make the application to the spiritual.

The Romans' Emotional Response to the Gospel

In Romans 6.17 Paul commends the Roman Christians for the way they came to Christ. He says: *But thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over.*

Note how the Romans were motivated out of the heart to obediently respond to the gospel. From the heart describes a very personal decision one makes, by his own volition, to surrender to God. But Paul's words go farther. He is not speaking of superficial or coerced obedience, but rather something

deeply felt and deeply motivated from deep inside someone.⁴ The Christian reality is a matter of the heart. Paul focused on this in at least two other places in Romans:

- Romans 5:5: This hope will not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
- Romans 10:9-10: If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation.

Paul’s emphasis on the heart makes sense when we think about salvation by grace through faith. We have been released from the penalty of law and thereby deemed “not guilty.” How can we not be impacted to our very core when we read *there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus*, Romans 8:1? Salvation by grace is a matter of the heart.

What You Received the Day You Became a Christian

Light

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, Ephesians 5:8. Just like my friend who walked out of what could have been a dark cave of death, spiritually, you were brought out of darkness and into the eternal light of Jesus Christ.

- Isaiah 9:2, 4: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness. . . .For you have shattered their oppressive yoke and the rod on their shoulders, the staff of their oppressor, just as you did on the day of Midian.
- John 12:46: I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me would not remain in darkness.

A Relationship

Through the blood of Jesus, our **hostility** has been replaced with **peace**, Ephesians 2:14. We are no longer **aliens**, but **citizens**, 2:19. We are no longer **strangers**, but members of **God’s household**, 2:19. This was all made

⁴ Dunn, James D. G. *Romans 1–8*. Vol. 38A. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988, p. 343.

possible through the riches of God's **mercy**. Because of His great **love**, while we were **dead** in our trespasses and sins, God made us **alive** together with Christ. By **grace** we have been saved, and we have been **raised** up with Him and **seated** with Him in the heavenly places, Ephesians 2.4-6a.

The day of your salvation was the most momentous day of your life. On that day you received:

- **The Father**, who knows your name. While this passage has an immediate application to the redemption of Israel, its ultimate application is for all who desire to be a part of spiritual Israel: *Now this is what the Lord says— the one who created you, Jacob, and the one who formed you, Israel— “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; **I have called you by your name; you are mine**, Isaiah 43.1.*
- **Jesus**: *Now if **Christ is in you**, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness, Romans 8.10.*
- **The Spirit**: *Don't you know that your body is a temple of **the Holy Spirit who is in you**, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 1 Corinthians 6.19.*

The Word of God

This is the instrument the Spirit continues to use on us long after our salvation: *This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe, 1 Thessalonians 2.13.* What a blessing that as we allow the word to *dwell within us richly*, Colossians 3.16a, we have a guidebook to get us through the rigors of life.

Talents and Gifts

You have been given non-miraculous gifts and abilities to use in service to others and for the glorification of God. *Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God, 1 Peter 4.10.*

Newness & Forgiveness

What you did before, doesn't matter anymore. It's all been forgiven. You have been remade. You are now the workmanship of God. *Therefore, if anyone is in*

Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come,
2 Corinthians 5.17.

In 1 Corinthians 6.9-11 Paul expresses it this way:

Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or males who have sex with males, no thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom. And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

In Ephesians 1.7 Paul summarizes it thusly: *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.*

Conclusion

All these things are worthy of an emotional response. The God of the universe loved us enough to do everything possible for us to spend eternity with Him. *It is so much more than obedience to a system of doctrine; it is about you and God together for all of eternity!* It is about our heart being given over to God.

Do you realize the magnitude of your salvation?

For Thought and Reflection

1. What are some of the drawbacks of emphasizing a system over touching a heart?
2. What does *from the heart* describe in Romans 6.17?
3. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the heart so much in Romans?