

September 2, 2012

Introduction to THE STORY

Welcome to our all-church study of the story of God's plan for rescuing us stubborn human creatures from our own self-destructive behaviors and choices. The book you have in your hands is not a re-write or a paraphrase of the Bible. It is a translation: Today's New International Version excerpted and arranged to present God's story in a chronological order that makes it easy to follow. Those who put THE STORY together have inserted italicized *transitions* to summarize the parts that are not present word-for-word as Biblical text. If you are familiar with the Old Testament you may not approve of the editors' decisions. Their purpose was not to whitewash the Old Testament characters but to make the narrative short enough to encourage folks who seldom read the Bible at all, let alone the Old Testament. I believe that if many of us and our families can experience THE STORY together week by week it will be worth the omissions. Maybe we can come back later and look at "What THE STORY didn't tell you!"

The adult study guides are designed to encourage dialogue in the group and to discourage the notion that every question has one "right" answer. Those of you who have studied the Bible in an academic setting may miss the question "but what REALLY happened?" in cases where archaeology and/or the modern scientific world-view raise questions about the facticity of the Biblical account. Those questions are missing from the study guides, not because they are uninteresting, or unimportant, but because in this study we are looking for the narrative continuity as it appears in the Biblical texts themselves. Of course that overall narrative is not only an interpretation of events and traditions by the Biblical writers but it's also an interpretation of the Biblical interpretation by the editors of THE STORY. In my judgment, the editors' interpretation is close enough to a widely accepted account of what God is up to in the world to be of use to us as a narrative that we all share in common as a basis for thinking about who God is and who we are.

If you have children or grandchildren in First Baptist's children's ministry or youth ministry, please engage them in conversation about THE STORY. It is very important for young people to realize that adults think that Bible study is something important and that adults keep on reading the Bible their whole lives. Ask children and youth their opinion of what they have learned. Don't act the expert. That begins the process of their formation as part of the "priesthood of all believers" who discuss and interpret the Bible together across generations. We have excellent teachers in our children's and youth ministries, but they have little influence compared with that of the adults in the young person's family. If Bible study is a "Sunday only" concern of yours, that is what your children will accept as the norm.

The function of the Bible in the church

Although the Bible includes many rules and much advice for living, its primary function is not to serve as a source for rules which, if obeyed, earn one good standing with God. Some of the imperative sentences (commands) in the Bible are not regarded by any churches as normative for behavior; some are enforced by some churches but not by others.

Here are a few examples. Which ones do you think must be obeyed by Christians LITERALLY, EXACTLY AS WRITTEN HERE?

___ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut 6:5).

___ Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:10).

___ Heal the sick, raise the dead, . . . drive out demons (Matt 10:8).

___ Go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19).

___ Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more (Prov 31:6-7).

___ Sell your possessions and give to the poor (Luke 12:33).

___ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet (John 13:14).

___ Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife (1 Cor 7:27).

___Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture (I Tim 4:13).

Applying the ancient Biblical text to life in today's world is not a simple matter. It requires some knowledge about the original context and a lot of prayer and analytical thought. ¹

The title of this study, THE STORY, suggests that the primary function of the Bible in the church is to provide the church and Christians with their identity as participants in God's story – God's plan for humanity. This includes, but is not limited to "God's plan for salvation" in the sense that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection reconcile humanity to God. Jesus' story is part of the longer story told in the Old Testament and cannot be understood or appropriated apart from the whole narrative. Individual Bible stories do not have their full meaning when we study them in isolation from the narrative in which they are embedded.

Administrative details

In addition to these study guides, each class/group will have a copy of a Resource Guide with maps, timelines, and historical background. The teachers may or may not use this in preparation and teaching.

On each Wednesday (beginning September 5) I will teach the portion of THE STORY that will be discussed on the following Sunday.

Take a look at your book before you start reading. Notice that there is a sketchy map on the front inside cover for places in the Old Testament and a similar one on the back inside cover for the places in the New Testament. On the pages right before Chapter 1 there is a "timeline." It is completely worthless prior to about 1000 B. C. That's because in order to date events in history we have to have a reference point; that is, evidence of a Biblical event from outside the Biblical text for which we have a firm date. By that standard, even the dating of the reigns of David and Solomon is mostly guesswork.

Beginning on page 390 there are some discussion questions, which I have used as a basis for the questions in the study guides. Beginning on page 401 there is a list of brief descriptions of the main characters in chronological order. On pages 406-407 you will find a list of the Biblical passages included in each chapter of THE STORY in case you want to pick up a complete Bible to get "the rest of the story."

I am very interested in your reports about how you think the study is going. Of course, you will want to express your opinions to your teacher/group leader, but in addition I would love to hear from each one of you. Later in the fall we will be scheduling evaluation sessions so we can improve the effectiveness of the project. Apart from critique/suggestions we will never know how to improve.

FALL SCHEDULE

September 2 - Introduction

September 9 – 10 pages of reading – "The Beginning of Life as We Know It"

September 16 – 12 pages – "God Builds a Nation"

September 23 – 12 pages – "Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh"

September 30 – 12 pages – "Deliverance"

October 7 – 10 pages – "New Commands and a New Covenant"

October 14 – 16 pages – "Wandering" – children and youth meet, adults have MAP vote so they read,

but do not discuss this chapter.

October 21 – 11 pages – “The Battle Begins”

October 28 – 20 pages total – “A few good men ... and women” and “The Faith of a Foreign Woman”

November 4 – 26 pages total – “Standing Tall, Falling Hard” and “From Shepherd to King” (time change)

Nov 11 – 27 pages total – “The Trials of a King” and “The king who had it all”

November 18 – 8 pages – “A Kingdom Torn in Two” read but not discussed. 150th anniversary Sunday

No 10:00 Bible study time.

November 25 – 23 pages – “God’s Messengers” and “The Beginning of the End”

December 2 – 1 Advent – 25 pages total – “The Kingdom’s Fall” and “Daniel in Exile”

December 9 – 2 Advent – 29 pages total - “The Return Home”, “The Queen of Beauty and Courage” and “Rebuilding the Walls”

Transition – END OF THE STORY FOR THIS FALL. NEXT 3 WEEKS WILL BE READINGS FROM A REGULAR BIBLE.

December 15 – 3 Advent – Matthew’s Story of the Birth of Jesus (Music Sunday – Blue Christmas)

Matthew 1:1 – 2:23

December 23 – 4 Advent – Luke’s Story of the Birth of Jesus

Luke 1:1 – 2:52

December 30 – 1 Christmas – John’s Prologue

John 1:1-18

For some people the weeks in which the reading runs to 25-30 pages will present a challenge in terms of time. It may mean recording a TV show you usually watch at its usual broadcast time. Or it may mean trying to squeeze the whole reading into Saturday night. If you have to choose between reading THE STORY and reading the study guide, by all means choose THE STORY. You can pick up the gist of the study guide in your Sunday morning group.

Since God is the source and main character of the Biblical story it’s a good idea to begin your reading each time with a request to the Holy Spirit for understanding.

I’ll be reading and praying along with you. May God use this experience to grow all of us toward becoming more mature followers of Christ.

Sharyn Dowd

Pastor for Spiritual Formation and Mission Engagement