

How to Tell a Bible Story

Bryan Elliff

I remember one of the first times I ever heard a Bible story deliberately told to me as an adult. I was sitting in one of our house church meetings, and my brother and sister began telling the story of Jesus' passion from the end of Luke. The story lived and breathed, impacting me almost as if I had never heard it before. I even remember how I felt when Jesus turned and looked at Peter after his third denial.



Since then, I've had more exposure to Bible storytelling, and I've become convinced that it ought to have a place in our Christian experience.

The fact is, God didn't only give us facts in the Bible, he gave us stories. And while the Bible does indeed give us an "official" version of these stories, we can sometimes so analyze and explain the text that we forget to experience them *as stories*. Storytelling can help us regain that experience. When we tell stories, they come to life, they become fresh again, and they communicate God's truth to our newly opened minds. We get to hear them again in at least one way that God intended.

I dare you to tell a Bible story. But first, let me give you a few ideas about how and when to do it.

How to tell a Bible story

- *Pick a good story.* Try to find a story, or set of stories, that have a reasonably clear beginning and ending. I suggest that you start by telling parables because they are short and require very little background explanation. From there, you could move to historical narratives from the Gospels or the Old Testament. As an example, I've recently been telling the Exodus stories in our church meetings.
- *Study the story in the Bible.* If you were to tell the story of the prodigal son right now, how would you do? You may find that you didn't know the story as well as you thought. You see, it takes a real familiarity with a story to be able to tell it well. Therefore, the first step in telling a Bible story is to read the story in the Bible . . . a lot. As you read, try to envision the story in your mind. Ask yourself, "What would that have looked like? For example, I realized recently that I was unable to envision what kind of cords Jesus made his whip out of as I was preparing to tell about when he cleansed the temple. See if you can fill in these gaps by studying the text and its background. Finally, look for the meaning, asking, "What is the big point of this story?"

- *Tell it in your own words.* You've read and studied the story, now let it flow. Be animated, using your hands, sitting, standing, walking around. Invite your listeners into another time and place. *Tell* the story, don't just recite it.
- *Don't embellish too much.* You don't want to take so much liberty that you reinvent the story. Tell it in your own words, but make sure you're still telling the *biblical* story. You aren't creating historical fiction, you're passing along a true tale. In short, make it interesting and make it real.
- *Stay in the story.* You might be tempted to start teaching or explaining your story with "meta-comments" as you are telling it, but it's far better to stay inside the story the whole way through. There will be time afterward for teaching and discussion.
- *Practice.* Go over the story a few times before you tell it. Go into your room and tell it out loud, imagining your audience.

Ways you can use Bible storytelling

- *In church.* If you have opportunities to teach, you may want to incorporate this into your teaching. You could use it in a sermon, in Sunday school, or in a small group. And all ages love it, adults to kids. In our house church model, we often have one or two people share a story during the meeting.
- *To encourage or challenge other believers.* The opportunities here are almost endless. You may need something to share with someone who is going through a tough time. Maybe you have an opportunity for a teaching point when some church kids are over at your house to play. Perhaps you are just trying to fill some empty space in the conversation with something edifying. I often will tell a story when we have another family over for dinner, for instance.
- *With your family.* Bible storytelling is a wonderful way to teach your kids the Bible. Kids' story Bibles can be great, but why not consider telling them a set of stories yourself? You could even get them involved to act out different parts and tell the story with you.
- *With non-believers.* This is one of the most natural and powerful ways to speak about Jesus with non-believers. Everyone wants to hear a story! And often, it can lead to further conversation. With non-believers who are interested, you could even offer to tell them a series of stories about Jesus over a few meetings. Each time, you could have them tell the story back to you in order to learn it, and you could end with some discussion.