THE STORY

Prologue – Week 2

Engaging God’s Story

August 13-14, 2016

Appearing on the Big Screen…

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The Levites…instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

*Nehemiah 8:7-8 NIV*

“…all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”

*Nehemiah 8:9 NIV*

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

*Nehemiah 8:12 NIV*

From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

*Nehemiah 8:17 NIV*

Action Steps

**PERSONAL** – We want you to **read** and **study** the chapter for yourself

**HOME** – We want you to **talk** about God’s Word around a **meal**.

**COMMUNITY** – Join a **Story Group** to **discuss** what you are **learning**.

**WORSHIP** – Attend one of the **church** services each week.

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Randy Frazee

Oak Hills Church, San Antonio, TX

August 13-14, 2016

**To view The Story Prologue Week 2 sermon video, [CLICK HERE](http://media.oakhillschurch.com/default.aspx?page=3679&item=537).**

**Introduction**

I grew up in an unchurched home in Cleveland, Ohio. My parents weren’t against Jesus, he just didn’t make the shortlist of priorities in their life. But I did have two spiritual deposits in my life. The first was a ceramic plaque that hung over my bed, “Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray that Lord my soul to take.” What kind of sick person writes a prayer like that to kids? Every night I went to bed there were no sweet dreams or visions of sugar plums dancing in my head. No, I thought, “This just might be it for me!”

In addition to the frightening plaque, my grandmother bought my sister and me a Bible when we were just kids. I still have it. *Randy holds up his Bible.* It is a black leather, King James Red Letter Edition with a cross zipper on it. My sister’s was white. It sat on a small bookshelf in the hallway between our bedrooms. I remember several times walking by the bookshelf and being drawn to the book. I sensed that there was something in it that I needed to know – it’s like I heard it breathing when I walked by.

I would take it off the shelf, unzip it, lay on the floor, tuck the palms of my hands under my chin, prop up my legs and crisscross them and then open it up and start reading. I kept at it for ten minutes or so before I surrendered with a sigh. Zipped it back up, place it on the shelf and went about my day.

I read it, but didn’t get it. Apparently, I am not alone.

The average family owns four Bibles but 41% confess to **never** reading it. Maybe you can relate. Research tells us that most people, not just people who go to church, but most people have “reading through the Bible” on their bucket list – things they want to do before they kick the bucket…right up there with climbing Mount Everest and going skydiving, and those last two might just be more accessible to them.

**The Pattern of Moses**

The journey we are about to take called The Story, is designed to fix this and give you access to the amazing truths of God’s Word. Last time when we were together we discovered something that Moses put in place for Israel before he died to keep them on track with God.

*Refer to the poster of the books of the Old Testament from last week’s message. Point to the books as they are referenced.*

In Deuteronomy 31:9-13 Moses set up a new pattern for them to follow. Here it is: Every seven years all of Israel – the men, women, children and foreigners living in their camps should get together and read the Story (the first 5 books of the Law), from beginning to end. It is imperative for God’s people, then and now, to know his story. Who is God? Where did they come from? Where is the story heading? What does God expect of them?

The children of Israel did this during the days of Joshua from – the Glory Days, as Max calls it. In this season, they did a great job. They were dialed into to God’s Story and sought to align their lives to it and were richly blessed as a result. Here we’re reminded of the principle: when you align your life to God’s Word, you experience the blessings God has intended for you.

But after the time of Joshua, the children of Israel began to wane in their commitment. They were off and on, in trouble and out of trouble.

* **Judges:** During the period of the judges, they were off and on
* **Kings:** During the first 3 kings of Israel, they started strong with Saul but he finished weak, not keeping his people in God’s Word. As a result God replaced Saul with David, who basically returned Israel to the days of Joshua. The monarchy of Saul is recorded in 1 Samuel, and the monarchy of David is recorded in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. David passes the crown to his son Solomon, who like Saul starts off strong but finishes weak, and even worse, he marries multiple foreign women to expand his kingdom, but they introduce foreign gods into the nation of Israel, and Solomon stopped gathering the nation to align their lives to God’s Word. Solomon’s reign is covered in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.
* **Divided Kingdom:** Things got so bad, God stepped in and disciplined Israel by dividing them into two weaker nations – the northern kingdom called Israel, and the southern kingdom called Judah. During the divided kingdom period, covered in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, only 5 of the 43 kings were aligned to God’s Story. The rest “did evil in their own eyes” (a phrase repeated over and over again in 2 Kings).
* **Captivity:** Then in 605 BC everything came crashing down. Because they got their lives so far removed from the story God was telling, God disciplined them. God allowed the Babylonians to come and burn down the city of Jerusalem, including the beautiful temple Solomon built and exiled or deported them to Babylon for 70 years – at which time God would orchestrate their return.
* **Rebuilding:** After the seventy years is up, they start returning. The first group returns in 538 BC with a guy named Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple. 80 years later a second group returns and something quite unexpected happens. These events are recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. A couple of years after the second group returns, in the year 444 B.C., in the seventh month, something very special happens. It is important to note that while they were exiled in Babylon, it was impossible for them to gather and fulfill the command of Moses to get together and go through the Story. A total of 142 years has elapsed since they were captured in the year 586 B.C., which means it has been 142 years since they fulfilled the command of Moses to get together and read through the Law. 142 years divided by 7 means they missed 20 cycles of reading God’s Word from beginning to end as a community. That’s essentially four generations. That means that you, your children, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren were starved of God’s truth. Now, 142 years later, they’re back in the city of Jerusalem, a broken people. The discipline of God had worked, and they decide to get their lives back on track with God.

**What did they do?**

**Reinstating the Pattern**

Turn in your Bibles to Nehemiah 8.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

*Nehemiah 7:73b-8:1 NIV*

First of all, notice, Ezra the priest is not leading the charge but the people are. “Ezra, you go get the Bible and start reading. We are not missing out anymore on God’s blessings.” How wonderful it is to minister to a group of people who are passionate, intentional and proactive about wanting to get into the Word of God. The joy Ezra experienced when the children of Israel came to him is the joy that Max and I experience in ministering to you. We admire the way you are passionate to align your lives to God’s Word.

So just as Moses instructed 950 years earlier, all the men, women and children gathered together to go through God’s Word – notice they even did it in the seventh month, according to the pattern Moses set out. Something unexpected happens when Ezra *opens the book* to begin reading it –

“…as he opened it, the people all stood up.”

*Nehemiah 8:5*

You may have been in religious services where the minister says, “Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.” This is where that idea comes from but there’s a difference here. In this situation, it wasn’t the minister who is instructing the people to honor God’s Word. They were so ready, so hungry they stood up spontaneously on their own. You are welcome to do the same. Ezra was so moved he broke out in praise to God and all the people lifted their hands and shouted “Amen” and then planted their faces on the ground in worship of God. When your heart is that tilled and soft before the Lord before you get into the Word, you can expect something big from God.

Next we discover something really cool taking place.

The Levites…instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

*Nehemiah 8:7-8 NIV*

This service lasted for about 5 to 6 hours straight. And we complain about an hour-long service! During the reading, the Levites were like small group leaders who were huddling the people in groups to have a discussion on what was being read so they could understand it. How cool is that?

**How did the people respond to this experience in God’s Word?**

1. They wept

“…all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”

*Nehemiah 8:9 NIV*

I’m sure the weeping came from regret for all the years they had missed the blessing of God. But I’m also sure that they were weeping because as Ezra was reading the Law, they discovered a God of second chances. They were weeping because they had a new opportunity to take what God was offering to them and change the rest of their life. They were weeping so loud, Nehemiah, the governor, had to step in to tell them stop crying and go home and share a meal with their family. So they did.

1. They ate together as a family and discussed God’s Word

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

*Nehemiah 8:12 NIV*

1. They applied what they learned.

Already they are doing what, years later in the New Testament, James will challenge us to do – to not be mere hearers of the Word, but to be doers. You will notice in verse 13 that on the next day, the heads of all the families came to Ezra and basically said, “As you were reading yesterday we understood that the Festival of Tabernacles is coming up this month. We are tired of missing out on the blessings of aligning our lives to God’s Word, so we want to do it.” And they did.

The Feast of Tabernacles was basically a weeklong campout to keep the people of Israel tethered to God’s Word. Families would live outside their houses in a tent and tell their children the stories of how God provided for them in the desert for forty years as they left slavery in Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. They told the stories of their shoes lasting for 40 years, how their clothes did not wear out, how God provided water in the desert, how manna fell from heaven, how God’s protected them from their predators and enemies. All these stories carried the lesson that the God who took care of them in the wilderness is the same God who will take care of them now, if they align their lives to God’s Word.

How did they approach the Feast of Tabernacles this time? Did they have a half-hearted, with a “let’s just get this over with” attitude? Look at the report of the week in verse 17 –

From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

*Nehemiah 8:17 NIV*

They were returning to their “Glory Days.” Here we are reminded that engaging fully in God’s Word brings joy. Does anybody want a little more joy in their life? Well, what we are doing with The Story is simply replicating what Israel did here in Nehemiah 8.

**Application & Action Steps**

This is what we are seeking to do with The Story experience. We want you to fully engage with God through his Word and through prayer. We have four environments we want you to experience to drive the impact of God’s Word deep into your life.

*Refer to The Story resources displayed on a table.*

**PERSONAL** – We want you to **read** and **study** the chapter for yourself

This is an assignment for everyone in the family – we want you to read one chapter a week for 31 weeks. You can choose from amongst these books whichever one you want to do your reading in. We have a book designed for every age level, or reading level in the family, so everyone can read together. We want everyone reading God’s Word together for this entire ministry season.

*Show each book, and explain how the people at your church can get the resources.*

**HOME** – We want you to **talk** about God’s Word around a **meal**.

Embedded in the Study Guide each week is a question we want you to discuss around a meal with your family. This is single best thing you can do for your family. We are so committed to helping you with this we are providing an incentive. When you gather around the table for a meal to discuss God’s Word, simple take a family “selfie” picture and upload it to our **Meals Together** Facebook page. Once a month there will be a drawing for a restaurant gift card for the family at each campus. At the end of our journey there will be a grand drawing for a family weekend getaway at Schlitterbahn Waterpark. Now, how cool is that?

**COMMUNITY** – Join a **Story Group** to **discuss** what you are **learning**.

We have a vision to start 500 Story Groups all around the greater San Antonio area and even beyond if those of you watching online want to start a group in your area. We will be posting groups that are open and you can look to join one closest to you or you can start a group. Become a Levite. We will train you. It’s not that hard. I have done a teaching video for all 31 weeks that I recorded on the Guadalupe River. You can ask people in your neighborhood or workplace or wherever to join you and/or you can post your group online with us.

**WORSHIP** – Attend one of the **church** services each week.

Each week we will give a message on the same chapter in our worship services, student ministries and every age group in our children’s ministries down to the nursery.

We believe if you will engage in these four environments, and make the commitment to do this for the next 31 weeks, that just like the Israelites you will experience great joy.

**Conclusion**

I am now a grandfather. And just like my grandmother, I gave my granddaughter Ava a Bible. The difference? When Ava lays on the floor, tucks the palms of her hands under her chin, folds up her legs and crisscrosses them to read it…her Baba is right on the floor with her helping her to understand it, to know how much God loves her and has a wonderful and good plan for her life.

A few years ago, I did just that, and my daughter recorded it on her iPhone without our permission. Here is Ava with me as we are reading *The Story for Little Ones.*

<https://vimeo.com/179230527>