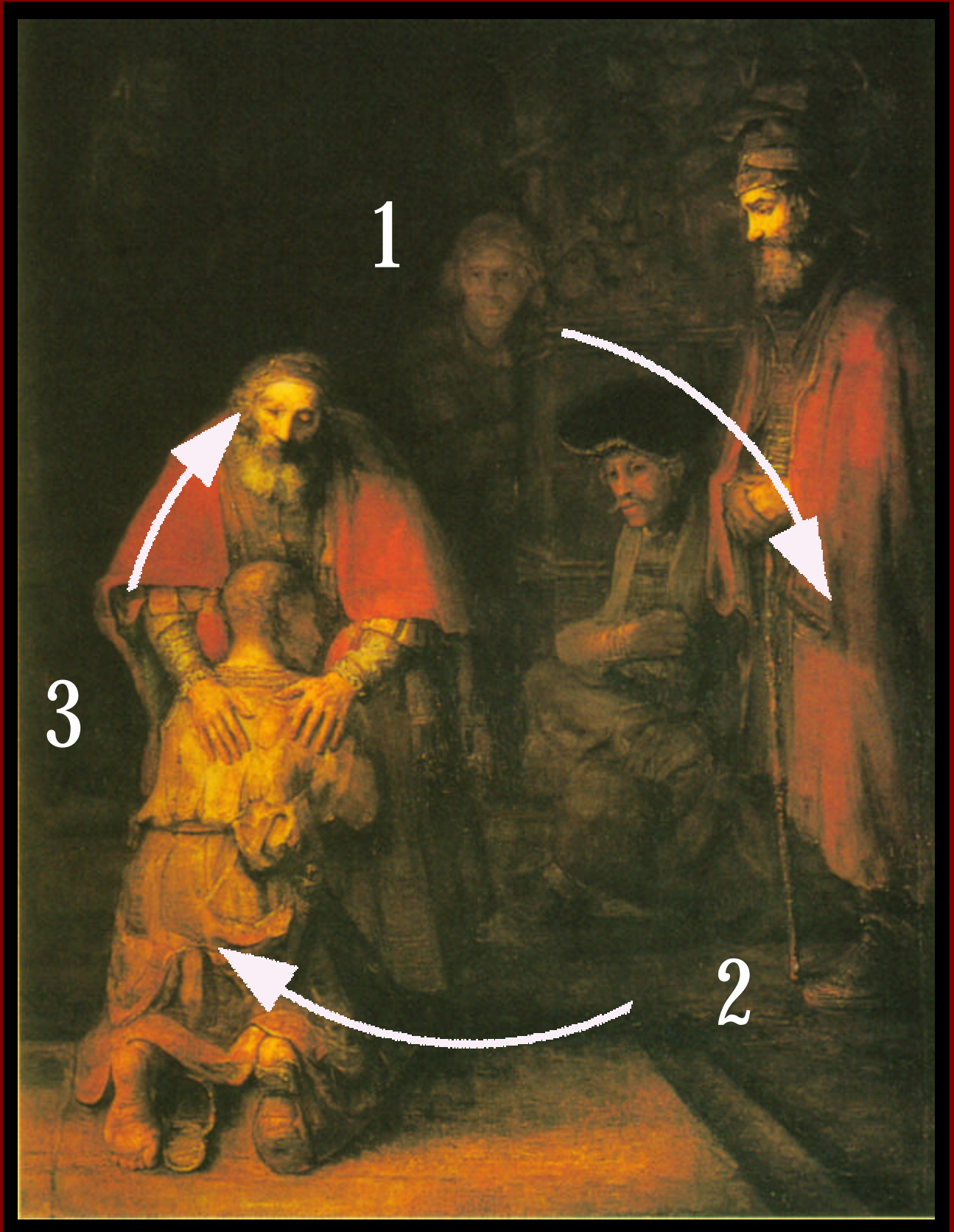


EVANGELISM

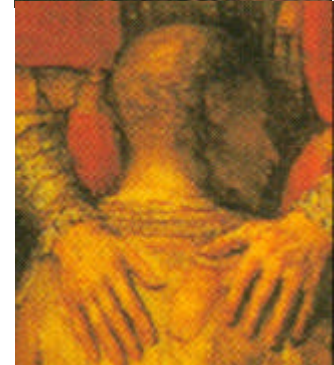
A movement in Three Stories



Dave Thurston

Contents

Study	Title	Page
Study 1	Living in Christ	
	Input	6
	Bible Study	11
Study 2	Whose Story First?	
	Input	19
	Bible Study	24
Study 3	My Story	
	Input	30
	Bible Study	40
Study 4	Another's Story	
	Input	45
	Bible Study	50
Study 5	God's Story-My Story-Their Story	
	Input	55
	Bible Study	63
Appendix 1		68
Appendix 2		71



Preface

The cover of this book is a copy of the painting by Rembrandt called, *The Return of the Prodigal*. It was painted by Rembrandt toward the end of his life. Within it, are captured, all of the long experiences of Rembrandt's own life. His success and failures along with his joys and disappointments find their place in the figures of the younger prodigal son, the older son and the blind father - who still sees more than most. This wonderful painting first came to my attention when I read Henri Nouwen's book of the same name.

The parable that Jesus told is the story of a younger son who leaves his father and his older brother to live 'life' on his own terms— with his father's money. In a far off country, after squandering his fortune, he comes on hard times. This not-so-good Jewish boy is reduced to not only looking after the pigs, but looking with longing on what the pigs are eating as he is so hungry. He decides to go home. He realizes he cannot expect to have his old place back—the place of a son—but he knows at home his 'Dad' will probably give him a job as a hired hand and then at least, he can keep body and soul together. He sets off for home. His Father sees him as he nears the village. The old man runs out into the open then throws his arms about his son and kisses him. With his prepared speech, the younger son is only able to confess his sin. His father doesn't want to listen to all he has to say, he is too eager to rejoice in his son's return. Now it's time to celebrate— to bring him back into the family and into the community with a feast provided by the fattened calf. The older brother, the brother who has not left, who has always done what he was told, comes through the fields to investigate the source of the music—only to find his worst suspicions confirmed—that 'Dad' has gone soft. His temper boils over and it is here we see no similarity between the father and the sons but a great deal of similarity between these sons who on the surface appear so different. If we scratch the surface of these two brothers' lives we see a likeness that is hardly flattering; both sons think their loving, wonderful father is satisfied with slaves rather than sons. "Make me one of your hired men," says the younger. "I have slaved for you all my life," says the older. Both make the father come to them in the fields. The haunting question posed by the father to the older son in the last two verses remains with us,

³¹ "My son," the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

What would happen if the older son had gone off seeking the younger son in the first place, what would that look like? Well, a lot like the ministry of Jesus. Of course in its original setting it is a stinging rebuke to the Pharisees (the older son) and the teachers of the Law who had their noses out of joint because the ‘sinners’ (younger son) were coming to Jesus and finding acceptance.

I want to recast the parable and place us in the story. Look at the picture again. What if we are the older son who has learned from the heart of the Father and looks for opportunities to welcome back all younger sons. How could we do that in a real way? This Study book goes some way to explaining why that should be so, possibly how it could be so.

I must acknowledge Chris Harding, who gave me permission to pinch his idea of the 3 stories. This is an ‘in-house’ production but still another acknowledgement is appropriate—no matter what happens in the future and we cannot see too far, I want to thank the people of Central Sydney Presbyterian Church for their patience and love over the last seven years.

Study 1 – Living In Christ



A Problem with Evangelism

Evangelism can so easily be reduced to a series of propositions we present to people in a 'take it' or 'leave it' fashion. We challenge them as to whether they agree to the propositions and offer a course that our church runs from time to time that takes them further along the road. Whether this is the reality of the situation or not, this is how we can reduce the sharing of the Life of God with another human being. A strategy so simple, so elegant and all that is needed is a bit of courage to get the ball rolling.

I asked my Bible Study group for examples of when evangelism (the sharing of the Life of God – Jesus with another) had been done well. Every example had nothing to do with the content – the story of what God has done in Jesus (that was a given, we are an evangelical church). The distinguishing characteristic was how it was relational: how it was done in such a way that the person who wasn't a Christian was treated with commitment and respect. Prominent among their concerns was the 'abuse' people feel when they are just treated as objects to be told the gospel. If there is no appropriate response, no agreement or belief, then they feel they are 'dumped' in favour of someone with greater potential.

The problem with many evangelistic strategies or presentations is just that – they are merely strategies and presentations. I must be careful to not overstate this point: there is nothing wrong with small 's' strategies. Jesus had a strategy – that's why he could say, "It is finished" from the cross (John 19.30). Paul had a strategy in his missionary work to go to the synagogues and tell the story of Jesus to Jews and Gentile God-fearers; if he was rejected then he went to the Gentiles (Acts 13.46).

Presentations, likewise, are not inherently evil or misguided. Learning a gospel outline is a must if we are going to be effective when asked 'to give a reason for the hope you have' (1 Peter 3.15). So what's the problem? Strategies and presentations can become the equivalent of Christian technique – do this and this and this and it will work. This is the temptation Paul the apostle faced and resisted over and over again:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. 1 Corinthians 2:1

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Just a Matter of Technique?

The danger of any technology is that by using a 'technique' we believe we've worked out how to manage life without God. 'Life' is reduced as a consequence, for we appear for that brief moment to be in control. If we are Christian, impacted by our technological society, we will still pray asking God to come and join us in our strategy and technique but it is us asking God to join us in what we're doing rather than joining God in his great work in the world. This is evident when you listen to the Christian 'advertising' used about various evangelistic techniques, it promises what we above all people should realise is given by God alone. Are they saying that God is so tied to this method that it is guaranteed to work? If it doesn't is it God's fault, the church's fault or the 'products' fault? Life is reduced because we have reduced God to our methodologies.

Christians don't fall into this trap on purpose. We are influenced by our technique worshipping culture. When we want something that 'works' we have already begun the process of reducing other human beings, ourselves, and – worst of all – the Lord God Almighty to 'elements' in the process. This contrast with the reality that we are unique creations in the image of God, and in the Lord's case, someone who works according to a formulae. My experience of people becoming Christians leads me to believe that people's stories are as varied as they are themselves. To so reduce the sharing of our life with another to a technique is to be diminished ourselves.

No one does this on purpose. We all do it unwittingly and in so doing we

can constantly miss the point. Putting prayer at the beginning rather than at the end of the process is not much of an improvement if we have reduced life to a simple process. 'Mechanistic' evangelism training can be dehumanising. When it is it is betraying itself!

This reminds me where in C.S. Lewis' book 'The Voyage of the Dawn Treader' there is an insight into the nature of stars. The ship, The Dawn Treader, has come to Ramandu's Island. They are near the end of the world of Narnia and have just heard that one of their number is to go to the very end of the world and remain there.

"And are we near the World's End now, Sir?" asked Caspian. "Have you any knowledge of the seas and lands farther east than this?"

"I saw them long ago," said the Old Man, "but it was from a great height. I cannot tell you such things as a sailor needs to know."

"Do you mean you were flying in the air?" Eustace blurted out.

"I was a long way above the air, my son," replied the Old Man. "I am Ramandu. But I see that you stare at one another and have not heard this name. And no wonder, for the days when I was a star had ceased long before any of you knew this world, and all the constellations have changed."

"Golly," said Edmund under his breath. "He's a retired star."

"Aren't you a star any longer?" asked Lucy.

"I am a star at rest, my daughter," answered Ramandu. "When I set for the last time, "Decrepit and old beyond all that you can reckon, I was carried to this island. I am not so old as I was then. Every morning a bird brings me a fire-berry from the valleys in the Sun, and each fire-berry takes away a little of my age. And when I have become as young as the child that was born yesterday, then I shall take my rising again (for we are at earth's eastern rim) and once more tread the great dance."

"In our world," said Eustace, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas."

"Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of..."

Because we can describe a process of sharing the gospel where some people become a follower of Jesus doesn't mean we have adequately understood the wonder of being born of God (John 1.12-13).

Telling Stories

We become vulnerable to this problem as soon as we begin to focus on evangelism as an object of study. For then we disconnect 'it' from the rest of our life so as to examine 'it' and understand the process and strategy. As soon as we do this we have fallen into the trap of 'technique' once again. Rather than disconnect, isolate and examine evangelism from the life of God and his people, we want as an alternative to learn three stories. Yes, this is not as efficient or as quick as other methods. In fact it isn't a method but God himself isn't apparently as worried about efficiency as we are at times. The three stories are:

- 'God's Story' – the story of God's life that culminates in Jesus;
- 'My Story' – who I am and who I am in Christ, how my story overlaps with God's story at significant points; and
- 'Another's story' – the story of my family member, work mate, neighbour who doesn't know or love the Lord yet.

Looking at the big stories means we don't reduce people to mere parts of a programme, but treat them as they are – like us – not completely knowable, an irreducible being made in the image of God.

Our focal point for these studies, the lens through which we will look at 'God's Story', 'My Story' and 'My Friend's Story' is the Story of Jesus in John's gospel.

Eugene Peterson describes the difference between the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke – 'synoptic' meaning 'from the same point of view') and John in this apt way:

"Matthew, Mark and Luke write like kayakers on a fairly swift flowing river with occasional patches of whitewater; there is never any doubt but they are going where the course of the river takes them. But John is more like a canoe on a quiet lake, drifting unhurried, paddling leisurely to take in aspects of the shoreline, noticing rock formations, observing a blue heron fishing in the rushes, pausing and drifting to sketch cloud patterns reflected in the glassy water."

The Life of Jesus

The Life of Jesus in John's Gospel is our text on evangelism and what we must notice first of all is that the centre of Jesus' life is not evangelism. This is where we begin to learn. This is the counter-intuitive training Jesus used with his disciples. The world is not changed through evangelism or through the mechanism of a new evangelistic programme, even if it is 'God's' evangelistic programme. So what is it that lies at the centre of Jesus' life?

The centre of the Lord Jesus' life is the love of the Father expressed in obeying him, making him known and doing his will. This is very much the essence of the law of the Lord in Deuteronomy 6.5:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Jesus, the man, the Word made flesh, God the one and only, loves God, knows him and therefore makes him known (1 John 1.14 & 18).

It is out of the love of God, knowing the Father, that Jesus makes him known.

If the love of the Father is the centre of Jesus' life, then it is only as we love the Father, through loving Jesus, that we will 'evangelise', live like him.

Living responsively to the Father was the essence of Jesus' living. It shaped his sense of time (John 2.4,13; 4.21,23; 7.6,8,30; 8.20; 11.55; 12.31; 13.1; 16.4; 17.1) and purpose (John 12.27; 17.1-26)

Most instructive is the word of Jesus upon the cross just before he died, "It is finished". We meet in John's gospel a Jesus who is unhurried by courses and programmes – a Jesus who pronounces a sixth day 'It is finished' blessing despite not having healed all the blind and lame in Israel, let alone all the world. It is in that sentence we see the different heart of Jesus to our own heart – a heart we need to pattern, copy and model ours on. We see a life lived with passion for God and others living responsively to those he finds in his way. There is no frenetic pace. There is no filling up of empty quiet spaces with business, no fitting everything in as if he might miss out on

something. Rather we see a life of deliberate purpose where it was possible to say, before the Sabbath rest in the tomb, "It is finished".

The greatest evangelistic passion I can have is learning to love the LORD in all my life responsively.

Life in Christ – A Life of Abiding

In the Old Testament, one of the most consistently used images for Israel is a vine (Psalm 80.8; Jer. 2.21;6.9; Ezek. 17.6;19.10; Hos. 10.1;). In John 15.1-8 Jesus identifies himself as the vine, as the true Israel, and his disciples 'get in' on what God's doing by literally getting 'in' Jesus.

Read John 15.1-8

The only option we have if we are to enjoy a God-defined, fruitful life is to remain in Jesus. Describe from the passage (v1-4) how that happens.

If we are to be fruitful, what are we to do?

How do you think you 'remain' in Christ?

Read John 15.9-17

How do we remain in Jesus' love?

How does the life of Jesus flow into the life of believers?

Dallas Willard in his book: 'The Spirit of the Disciplines' says: "It is part of the misguided and whimsical condition of mankind that we so devoutly believe in the power of effort-at-the-moment-of-action alone to accomplish what we want and completely ignore the need for character change in our lives as a whole. The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy. This is the feature of human character that explains why the road to hell is paved with

good intentions. We intend what is right, but we avoid the life that would make it reality.”

I want to abide in Jesus. What changes under God and in the power of the Spirit do I need to make to orient myself to this?

God's Story, My Story, Another's Story - Three stories by Diagram

Fig. 1

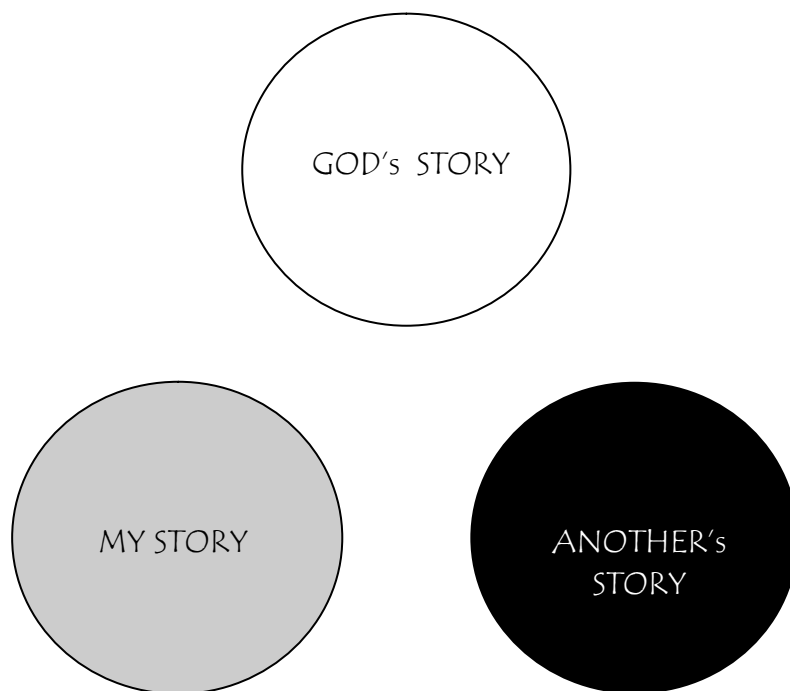


Fig. 2 The First Movement

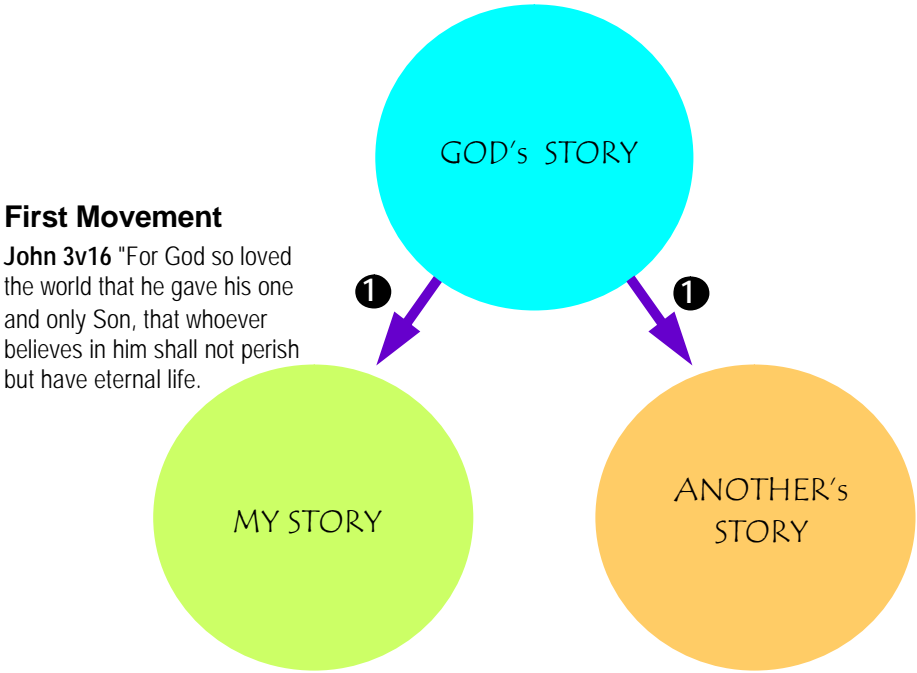


Fig. 3 The Second Movement

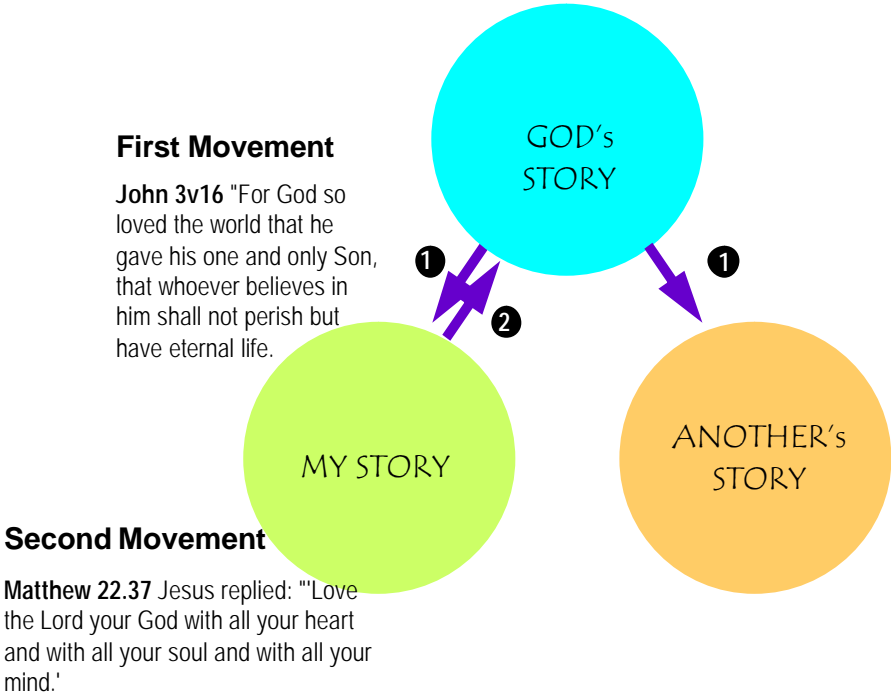


Fig. 4 The Third Movement

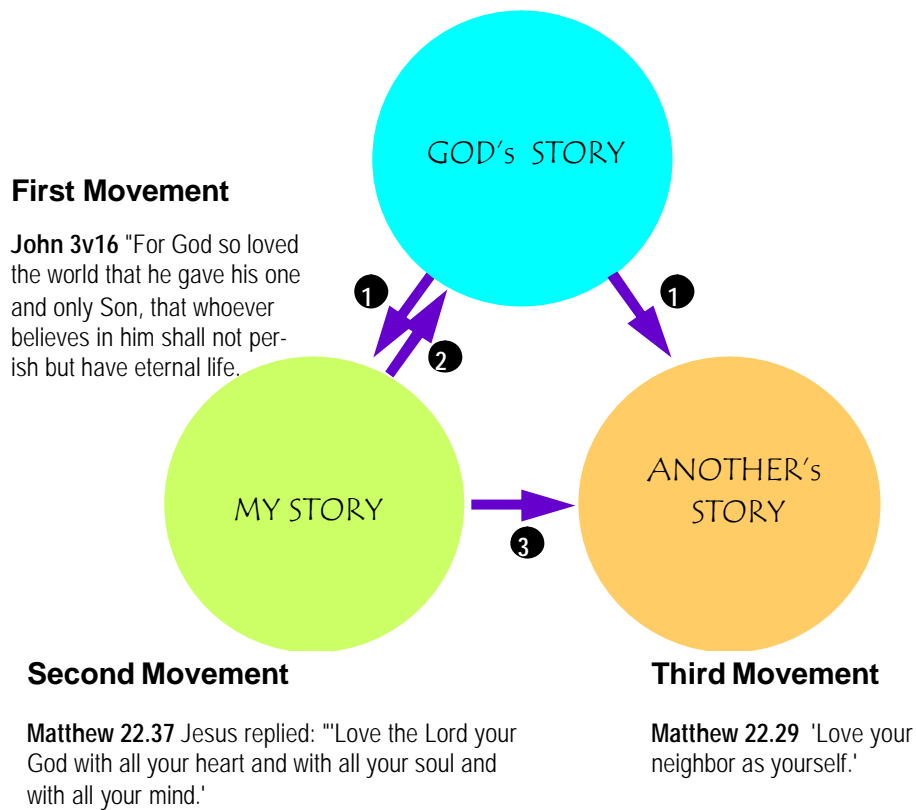


Fig.5 The Fourth Movement

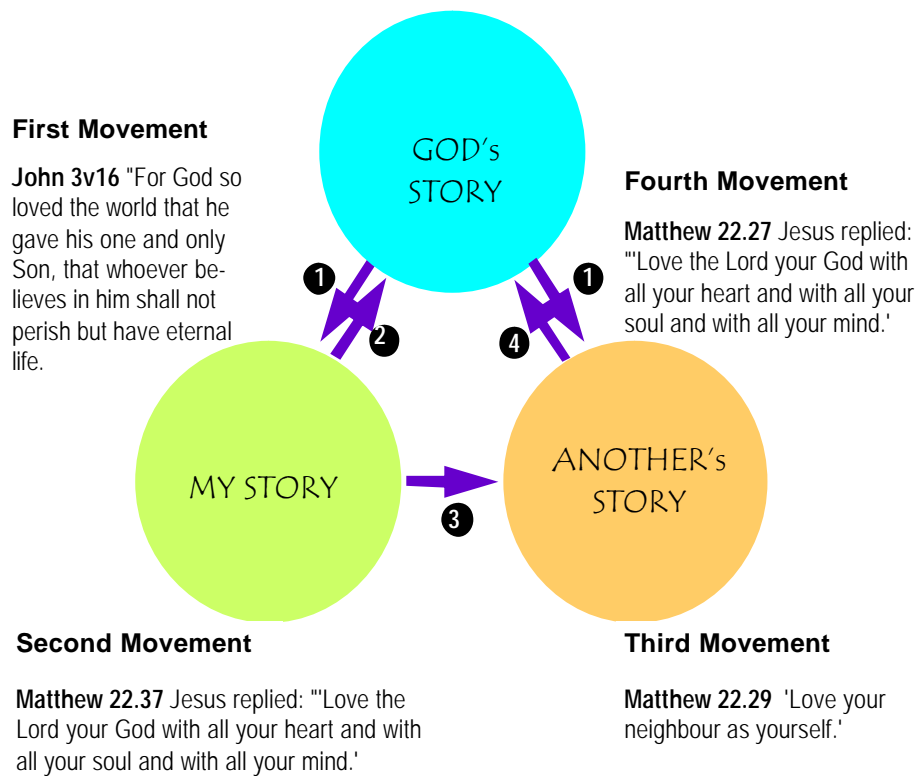
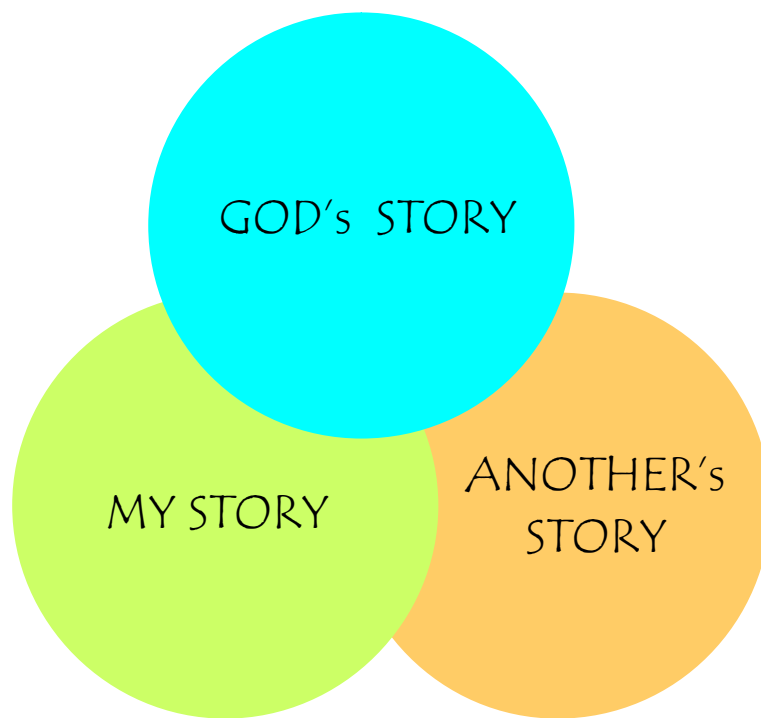


Fig 6 The Aim



Part of the discipline of this course is to read all of John's Gospel throughout and summarise it under the headings:

God's Story in the Life of Jesus
Aspects of your story (My Story) in the people Jesus meets and
Aspects of your Another's Story in the people Jesus meets.

One reading plan could be:

- Week 1 – John 1-4
- Week 2 – John 5-7
- Week 3 – John 8-12
- Week 4 – John 13-18
- Week 5 – John 19-21

Alternatively, you might read through John once a week with one of these perspectives in mind.

The aim is not merely the accumulation of information. It is to become familiar with the detail of Jesus' life and the lives of those he meets. John has a lover's eye for detail and, while we meet fewer people than the other gospels, we do spend more time with them and there is more consideration given to them. There is also in John's gospel extended reflection on who Jesus is and the significance of his work.

Prayer

Break into prayer triplets and pray for yourselves, your ministries and your witness

Meditation

Read John 1-4 and fill in the appropriate section in Appendix 1

NOTES

Study 2 – Whose Story First?



So whose story first?

So whose story first? That is the most important question we can ask. We tend to quickly volunteer our own story first.. We rush to give our testimony but we must resist the temptation. Before we speak we must listen – all true Christian spirituality begins with listening and in John's gospel we are made to stop and listen to God's story first. We become oriented to where we are by listening to the Story of God that climaxes in the Story of Jesus.

John tells us God's story in four acts:

Act 1	God in himself	1.1-2
Act 2	Creator & Creation	1.3-9
Act 3	God the Redeemer – Israel's Story	1.10-13
Act 4	Jesus – God Incarnate	1.14-21.25

Act 1 God in Himself John 1.1-2

While there are significant similarities with the start of Genesis: "In the beginning God created", John takes us back further and deeper into the very person of God himself. We are invited to know that God is not just one, but from the perspective of John's beginning, two persons. (By the end we will be introduced to a third – the promised Holy Spirit.) At this point, realities are revealed that are both general and specific: General – 'god', a generic term for deity, and the Specific – 'the Word'.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning.

What is unusual is that the Word is mentioned first – this is the Word who was with God. Our minds cannot help but go to the Genesis text and the repeated "And God said...", but this word is not just God's creative word of creation. This is God too: "The Word was God." Before creation was spoken

this is God's self-expression, his being, his person, his intention expressed and experienced, for that is what words are, even our words. Later on God will be revealed as 'Father' and the Word as 'Son'. The relationship of God and the Word (God), the expression of God, is maintained in the rest of John in the terms 'Father' and 'Son'. The Son is the expression of the person of the Father.

Act 2 Creator & Creation John 1.3-9

We have been readied now to re-enter the creation story, reoriented to see new truth in the old story. The Word, the one who was in the beginning with God, but still God himself – this one through whom the world is made. No mere word spoken, but God the Word, the direct expression of his purposes in making everything. John, in verse 3, wants to cover all bases so as to make sure there is no part of creation that is left out. Is this a way of saying that the Word himself is not part of creation? I think so! The Word was God!!

³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

The relationship that is described between the Word and men is no barren casual one. The Word is not just the creator but also the sustainer. He is not just the source of life which is represented by "in him was life". But there is more. That life was the light of men. All that is good and true is from the Word who created. There is opposition strangely from the very creatures who depend on the life and light of God the Word – darkness. There is darkness, but the light shines in the darkness – the testimony to life in God continues despite the opposition and the efforts of the darkness are not successful.

John loves words. He is a lover of the Word who communicates the story of God. It is not surprising therefore, that he delights in the nuanced meanings of words and uses them to great effect. The word he uses to describe the darkness' attempted coup over the light is just such a word, 'katelaben' can mean either 'overcome' or 'understand'. Man, the pinnacle of his creation, has a preference for the darkness. Nevertheless this darkness is not able to extinguish the light. In another way we can see how the alternate reading "the darkness has not understood the light" works so well because the light is ultimately the Word. God the Word is incomprehensible to the darkness, not because the Word was difficult to understand, too complex, but because they are opposites. (This uncompromising opposition continues in the ministry of Jesus. Look up John's 3.1; 3.19; 8.12; 12.35; 12.46;)

John's gospel moves to describe the ministry of John the Baptist in 1.6-9. The coming of the light is foreshadowed by the sending of a man called John. This is in anticipation of the third act of God's story.

Act 3 God the Redeemer - Israel's Story John 1.10-13

The Story of the bible is how the Lord God has joined himself to Israel. It depicts this relationship in all of its ups and downs with its details showing the world just who God is.

This relationship is a difficult, frustrating one. Time after time God is not recognized as Israel's God by Israel - Israel is committed to everything else other than a monogamous relationship with the Lord. (The relationship between Israel and the Lord is often pictured as a marriage). The Lord God is rejected and not received over and over and over again through idolatry and indifference. This is how Israel's story works itself out toward God. Surprisingly, God's response in this story is not indifference but passionate commitment and long suffering patience - all of which culminates in the coming of the Word into the world. John, in 1.10-13, summarises Israel's response to God in the life of Jesus.

In v10 we are told that the world does not recognize him despite being made through him. Amazingly, even though everything bears his fingerprints, conscious creation despises his workmanship and his kingship as

well. But what is most surprising is that when he comes to "his own", to Israel, his "treasured possession", the response is the same. His own do not revere him. The statement that his own do not revere him is the general situation, what the response is on the whole, but there are some exceptions. There are some who revere him – v12 – "To those who believed in his name". Here we move into the ministry of Jesus. These ones are given the right to become children of God. The story of Israel, stalled for years at the barricade of disobedience and death, now finds the roadblock removed. They can become children of God and this in a way that transcends the old categories of Jew and Gentile. For the paternity that is important here is not natural descent, that is Israel, or a human decision or a husband's will, that is human initiative, but born of God. What is held out for hope is nothing less than a way to move beyond the graveyard of human endeavour that is Israel in Ezekiel 37. If this informs our evangelism, it will mean that we depend on God rather than techniques.

Act 4 Jesus – God Incarnate John 1.14-21.25

The rest of John's gospel 'exegetes' and explains v14. John has hinted at and anticipated much in 1.10-13, but there is no way that his hints or previews could prepare us for the unlooked-for event of the Word becoming flesh and making his dwelling with us. In Israel it was anticipated in the 'dwelling' of God with the nation in the tabernacle and the temple but this can only be compared to the discovery of a 27th letter of the alphabet or a four dimensional square. This is God the Word, not only creating matter, not only entering history, but becoming a human being.

The Word who becomes flesh replaces the temple (God's 'dwelling' place among the Jews) and is the place where God's glory – his unparalleled glory – will be revealed. There is no comparison with other glories – the glory in the tabernacle or the temple. This is a unique glory: a "one and only glory" who comes from the Father

God is now known as Father in relation to the Word. The glory of the One and Only is described, not just as a 'shining glory' – it is full of what we need most, but should not have expected from God, given the treatment he has received from us – not recognizing him, not receiving him – here is grace and truth.

We need both grace and truth. There is no doubt it must be grace, for God coming to us can be no other. Truth is also no less a necessity. We have little truth of God in our lives. Unless he shows us who God is, we are left to our own erroneous ideas.

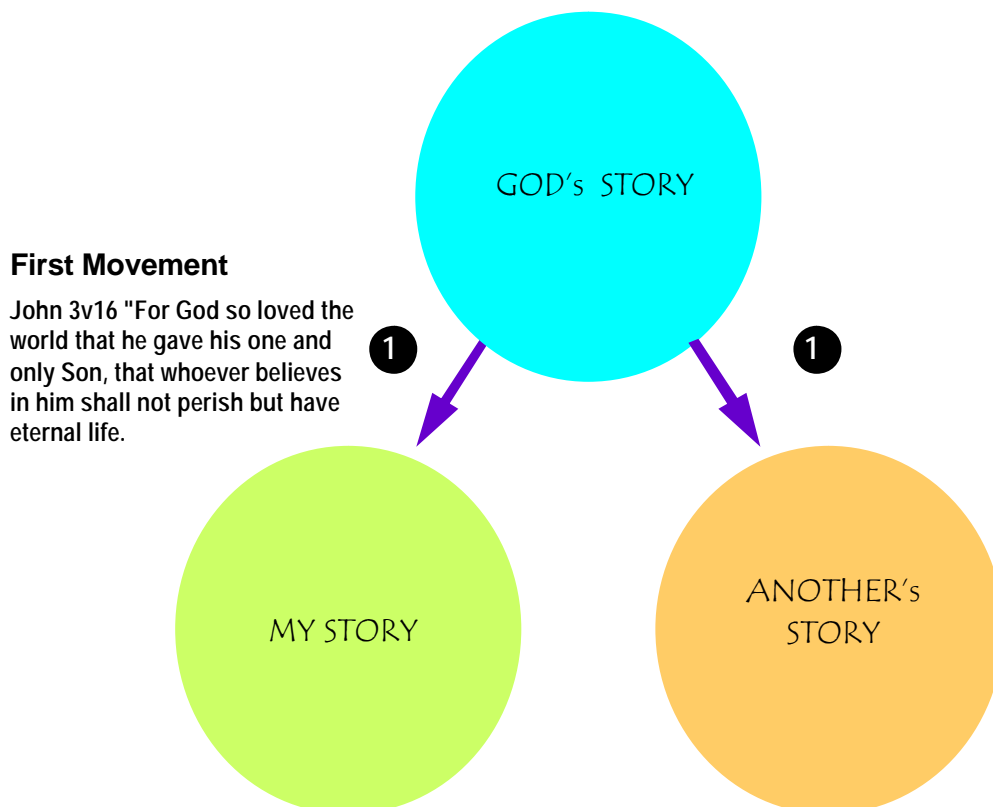
The rest of John tells us who this Jesus is, but we know enough to keep on reading.

This is God's Story – the eternal creator God, ignored and rejected by his creation, who still pursues us with grace and truth and clothed lately, not with glory alone but with flesh also.

Who is God? What is his glory? What grace does he bear? What truth is his? "Read on," says John, "Read on!"

This is God's Story – God who loves the unlovely. The God who so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

It is only when God's Story is at the centre that we understand our story well.



Bible Study – John 3.1-21

Nicodemus was a member of the group called the Pharisees. The Pharisees were, in one way, that party that had the most in common with Jesus and yet were the targets for Jesus' most scathing criticism. Why? Because they were nearly right and so where they were wrong was wrong all together.

The problem with the Pharisees was the way they used the law. At one level, they admitted they were sinners and needed grace, but after grace, humans could do what the law required. They fenced the law with the whole series of other laws so that, in keeping the laws on the perimeter, they would obviously have kept God's laws. Their problem, from Jesus' perspective, was that their diagnosis of the Jewish (human) condition wasn't radical enough – human beings were dead and needed resurrection. Human beings weren't just lazy needing to try harder, they needed a brand new start.

This fundamental difference of perspective comes out in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

The point of this study is to make sure we understand that someone becoming a Christian is life from the dead or, in Jesus' words here, being "born from above or born again". Our response to this prayer, we ask the Lord that those we know who aren't followers of Jesus will be born from above. At best, we are attend this new birth as 'midwives' – included but not necessary.

1. What are Nicodemus' credentials (v1,10)?

2. When does Nicodemus come to see Jesus (v2) and what is the implication of this (v20)?

3. What credentials does Nicodemus give to Jesus (v2)?

4. Jesus' response can seem almost disconnected from Nicodemus' opening comments or even rude, however we need to see that Jesus is in fact challenging his claim to knowledge. On what basis does he do this?

The word "born again" can also mean "born from above" which should have been the way Nicodemus understood it, i.e. John 1.13. However, he adopts an interpretation that is unnecessarily literal. Nicodemus talks about entering his mother's womb again.

5. Jesus counters with a different entering. "No-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and Spirit (v5)." How does Ezekiel 36.24-27 give the background to this verse?

6. Read v6. How does 1.12-13 and Ezekiel 37.1-14 describe how radical a change needs to occur in a human life?

7. Read v7-8. Why should Nicodemus not be surprised by “you need to be born from above” given Ezekiel 37.1-14?

8. Read v9-13. Jesus, as we know from John 1.1-14, is the one who is supremely born from above. Does Nicodemus comprehend Jesus? What then was the value of Nicodemus’ opening statement?

9. Read v14-18 and Numbers 21.4-9 and fill in the following table.

Numbers 21.4-9	John 3.14-18
Israel sins against God	
The Lord sends a punishment— venomous snakes	
Israel in despair	
Lord provides a way out	
Look at their punishment—people who looked (trusted) lived	

10. What is the world like that God loves so (John 1.10)?

11. What do you think 'believe' means in v16,18?

12. Go back to the story of the bronze serpent. The people who died were guilty of their rebellion whether they decided to look at the bronze serpent or not. What do you think it means in John 3.18 – "Whoever does not believe stands condemned already"? Why?

13. Read v19-21. "It all comes down to whether you're like a moth or a cockroach." How does this statement make sense as an illustration of John 1.19-21?

So then, someone becoming a Christian is not ultimately an act of a human will but the power of God at work.

Identify two people you believe the Lord is laying on your heart to particularly pray to be "born from above".

a.

b.

Here is a prayer to learn by heart so you can pray for these two people in particular...

God, cajole and nudge him, draw
delight, and dream him close,
drift him along love's eddy, dare him,
inch him to yourself and with each inch,
yield him a yard of joy. Touch him;
with tears teach him.
Tangle his thoughts in yours

Luci Shaw, *God in the Dark*, 1989 page 112

Prayer

Break into prayer triplets and pray for the two unbelieving people each person in the group is seeking to love well. Share some of the details.

1. _____

a. _____

b. _____

2. _____

a. _____

b. _____

3. _____

a. _____

b. _____

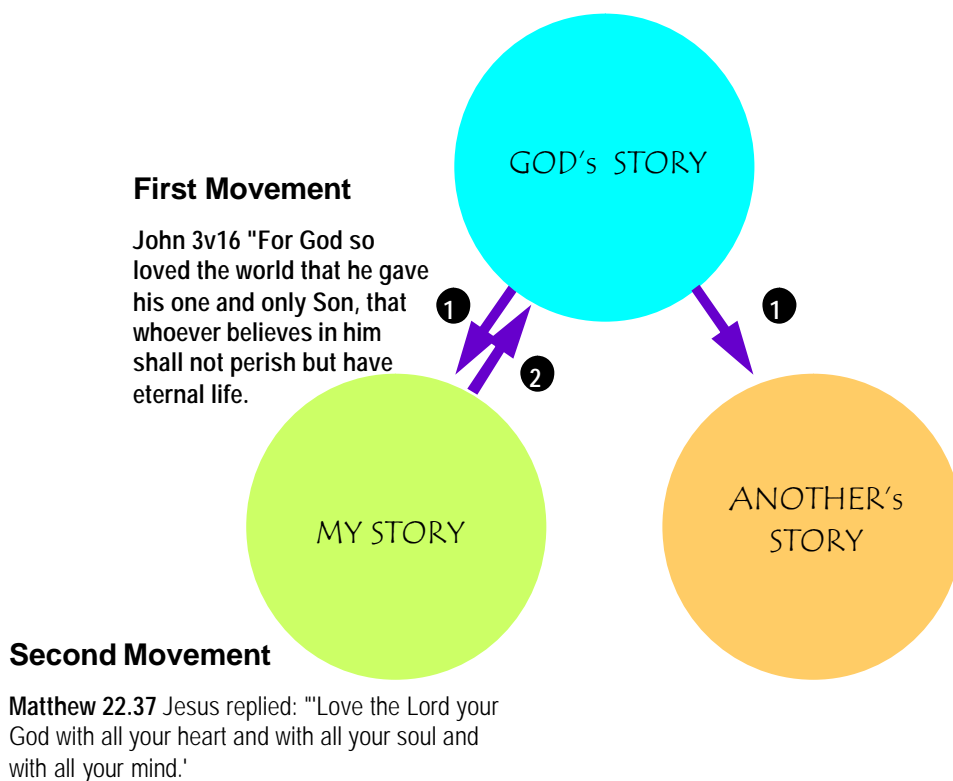
Meditation

Read John 5-7 and fill in the appropriate section in Appendix 1

Study 3 – ‘My Story’



This study aims to gain an appreciation of your own story and your relationship to God’s Story. What follows is more than listing the elements that we can use to create a testimony. Testimonies are very useful things but the purpose of this study is not to develop a simplified narrative of your life that can be used evangelistically, but to develop an appreciation of your story’s complexity. If we are to treat ‘another’s story’ with respect, we must appreciate how God has worked in our own life. Hopefully when we appreciate the intricacies and unhurriedness of God’s working in our story we will appreciate his working in ‘another’s story.’



God’s story is our guide in this. John summarizes God’s Story, in brief, in fourteen verses. It is a story that begins before creation – through creation in Israel’s history and ultimately lived out in the life of Jesus. The Lord tells and lives out a story that is at once simple but not simplistic, rich but not overdone – a story which is dotted through with people, places and specific detail.

The God of the bible is not a concept, not even the main concept. He had an address, a land, a people in which his life was woven. Like a needle to the thread, so is the Lord to Israel. In the resulting tapestry, you see the life of the needle in the life of the thread. It is this particularity that encourages us to tell our story in detail and then in turn to listen to another's story in the detail.

Another lesson we can learn from God's story is that it takes so long to tell. Sometimes we can wonder why couldn't God have just told us about himself in a summary form rather than a long narrative that covers a period of 3,000 years. We wonder that, but in doing so we need to be reminded yet again that the God of the bible does not present us with a philosophy to adopt but a life to respond to and live.

Act 1

So then, we need to be encouraged to take time in telling our story – not only the story of how we come to know the Lord, but how we have been fearfully and wonderfully made –

¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, ¹⁶ your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Psalm 139:13-16

How does this relate to the first act of God's Story in John 1.1-2?

Sketching Out 'My Story'

Act 2 – Creation The Structural Details of Your life

These are the things we have no choice in.

When were you born?

Where were you born?

Country of origin?

Parents' country of origin?

Family tree – Father, Mother, 1st child, 2nd child, 3rd child etc – where are you?

Mark those on the family tree who are Christians with an 'X'.
Draw a line from you to those to whom you are closest.
What is one thing about your mother that has impacted you?

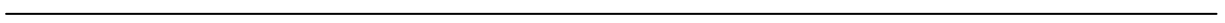
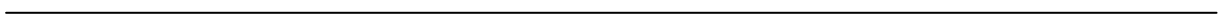
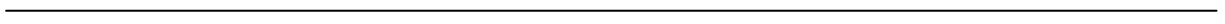
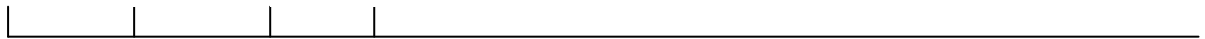
What is one thing about your father that has impacted you?

Act 3 – Historical Detail—A Time line.

The lines below can represent any group of years you like – 5, 7 or 10 – you make the choice about which one suits you. Using the timeline plot the detail of your history...

See the example below...

Born Cooma 1958	Brother born 1959	Move to Sydney 1961
-----------------------	-------------------------	---------------------------



Fill in where appropriate...

Who am I?

When I am stressed I...

When I am in a situation of conflict I...

When I am happy I...

My fears are...

My joys are...

My worst experience is...

My best experience is...

I would like to...

I am a (job) because...

My general mood as a child was...

My general mood as a teenager was/is...

My general mood as an adolescent (18-25) was/is...

My general mood as an adult is...

For me being a parent is...

Act 4—God in You

Below, write not just the 'how' you became a Christian but identify

influences and instances in your journey in becoming a child of God...

Share in triplets some of your story.
Sketching Another's Story

This is not just window dressing – getting to know your friend will require questions, sharing and listening. (Read the article by John Webb, “Dialogue of the Deaf” – Appendix 2)

Person 1

Person 2

When were they born? _____

Where were they born?

Country of origin?

Parents' country of origin?

Family tree –

Mark those on the family tree who are Christians with an 'X'.
Draw a line from them to those to whom you think they are closest.
What is one thing about their mother that has impacted them?

Person 1

Person 2

What is one thing about their father that has impacted them?

Person 1

Person 2

Act 3 – Historical Detail—A Time line.

Person 1

Person 2

Fill in where appropriate...
Who are they to you?

Person 1

Person 2

When they are stressed they...

When they are in a situation of conflict they...

When they are happy they...

Their fears are...

Their joys are...

Their worst experience is...

Their best experience is...

They are a (job) because...

P1

P2

Their general mood is

For them, being a parent is...

The Listening Jesus – John 4

Read John 4 aloud in the group. Answer the questions by discussion.

The quickest way to Galilee when you're on the run is through Samaria, a place filled with what was considered by the Jews to be half-caste people and half-formed theological ideas.

1. What is significant about where Jesus and the disciples stopped (v5)?
2. Describe Jesus' possible mood given he is tired, thirsty and it is 12 o'clock, the 6th hour?
3. When did women normally get water (Genesis 24.11)?
4. What does this tell us about the woman at this stage?
5. How does Jesus speaking to the woman show us how he understands his heavenly Father's providential ordering of events?

6. How does Jesus' request for help provoke a response in the woman?

7. Does Jesus answer the woman's question? What does he do instead (v10)?

8. The woman finds Jesus' statement about his ability doubtful considering he has no bucket, but where does her doubt take her (v12)?

9. Does Jesus answer her question about Jacob? What does he do instead (v13-14)?

10. How does the woman's 'thirst' parallel her situation (v15-18)?

11. The woman engages in a theological discussion – why?

12. How does Jesus keep her to the point – the point being answering her

question: "Are you greater than our father Jacob" (v21-26)?

13. What is the relationship between the Spirit and water?

The disciples come back as the woman returns to tell the villagers.

14. What does she say to the villagers (v28-29)? Expand...

15. How do the villagers respond (v39-42)?

16. How does this story provide us with an example of the three story process?

Reflection

What big ideas can you glean from this story.

Prayer

Break into prayer triplets and pray for the two unbelieving people each person in the group is seeking to love well. Share some of the details.

1. _____

a. _____

b. _____

2. _____

a. _____

b. _____

3. _____

a. _____

b. _____

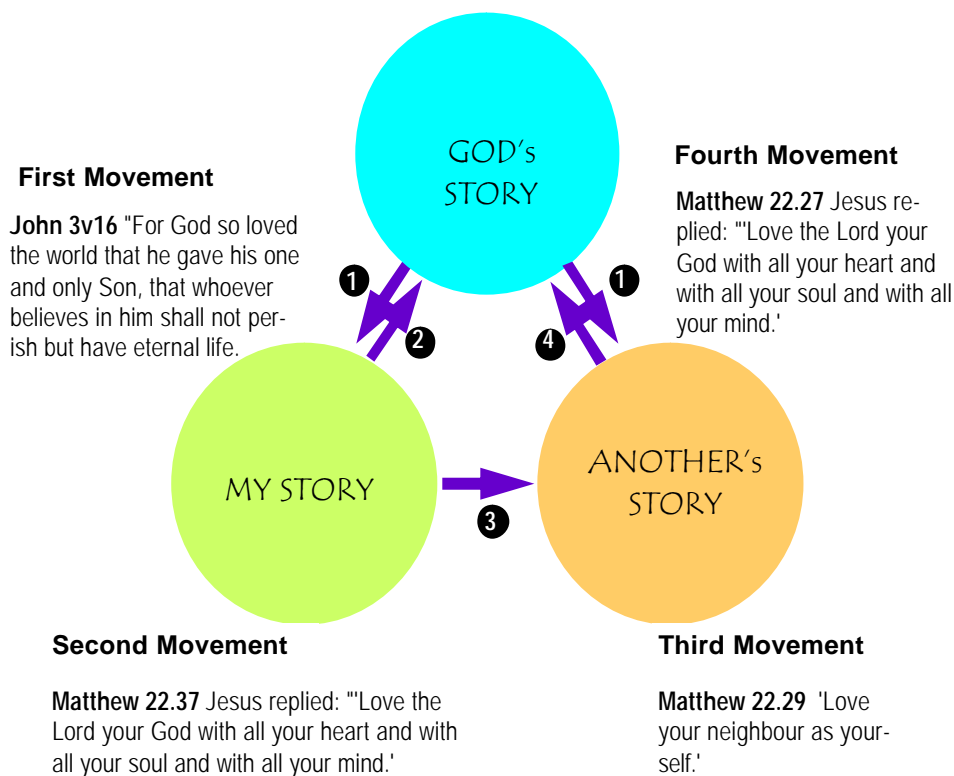
Meditation

Read John 8-12 and fill in the appropriate section in Appendix 1

Study 4 – Their Story



Making connections in all circumstances is how God loves us and how we can love those who don't know him yet. Our greatest insight into this privilege is to remember the ministry of the Lord in John's Gospel. In all of his interactions he operates out of love. Even when he is angry or disappointed, his anger and disappointment do not originate from an insecure ego but from an inner core of belief in the Father's love for him. Being like our Lord will mean cultivating a similar belief. Our movement toward our friend, workmate or family member is a movement motivated by the love of our neighbour.



In John's gospel this is a movement, not only into enemy territory – "the world did not recognize him, he came to that which was his own and his own did not receive him" – but even more than this, into vulnerability as he enters human flesh. He becomes crucify-able, stone-able, spit on-able, and betray-able. The movement of God in Christ toward us is not toward self-protection but love, not toward safety but risk.

As man, Jesus shows us that real life is not experienced in our "comfort

zones" – real life includes risk that carries with it the possibility of rejection. I'm not just talking about evangelism. This is the sort of life Jesus invites all his disciples to – a life like his, making connections, connecting with God so that our life reflects the life of God, connecting with the joyous occasions (John 2) and the saddest (John 11). It is a life of moving into the times of dislocation and being there, risking reputation and regard, representing the presence of God, remaining connected to the vine and drawing our strength from him, but being prepared to take the risk to witness the life of Christ in us by his Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus is a call to risk-taking. It is not a call to foolhardiness but to Christ likeness. Jesus was never foolhardy but always God-focused.

Evangelism is just a variation on the main theme of risk. So what does evangelism look like in John's gospel?

Making an Introduction... (John 1.35–51)

On John's word, Jesus is identified as the "Lamb of God". Two of those who heard followed Jesus and stayed with him. One of these two is identified as the disciple Andrew, who, the next day, found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus.

Jesus calls another disciple, Philip. Who, like Andrew, looks for someone to tell that he has found the Messiah and his name is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Philip's friend, Nathaniel, is sceptical about his friend's find, but comes and meets Jesus anyway, only to become a convinced follower.

From these two simple interactions, we can see the connections that already existed were the natural lines of introduction and exploration. Andrew and Philip wanted to share their 'friend' Jesus with their friends, Peter and Nathaniel, even despite expressed doubt – "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

In our own context we cannot take people to physically meet Jesus but we can encourage our friends to meet Jesus in the pages of John's gospel. This is why John's gospel was written:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written

that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20.30-31)

John's gospel shows us a model of introducing our friends to Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of God. Ultimately it is the reality of his person who creates faith that grasps life in his name. Our role is that of a signpost to the destination by our words and actions, but never to be the destination itself.

Witness

Chapter 13 of John's gospel marks a turning point in the whole story. In chapters 1-12, the emphasis is on "where" Jesus has come from – that is his authority. He is the one from heaven and speaks of what he has seen (John 3). In chapter 13 we hear a new theme – Jesus is returning to where he came from – to the Father's side and his glory. As he anticipates his departure, he prepares his disciples for their loss with the promised Holy Spirit the focus of his ministry in the second half of John (John 20.21-23); an example (John 13.1-17); and a prayer (John 17) for himself, for the disciples and for us who believe afterwards from their testimony and instructions on how to live. One of those instructions has to do with the centre of Christian witness and it has nothing to do with a comprehensive theological presentation. It has to do with how Christians relate to one another.

John 13:34-35 ³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

After Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, it is impossible to think that this love is anything but humble service of one another. This practical love is specific. It was to each other. Those very people who had refused to wash each other's feet and whose pride had made them blind to the need of others, their master, Jesus, who takes the bowl and the towel and washes dirt and sweat, feet with tinea, misshapen toes on each of the disciples' feet. He did not sit there making warm noises of approval. He washed their feet. Each word should be weighted.

In your relationships and my relationships, is there washing of feet? Is there

love incarnated, en-fleshed in practical acts?

This is not a matter that is an optional extra for Jesus' disciples. It is his command, and it is the means by which we demonstrate our connection to Jesus – "by this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

I suspect that when we love like this in our home-groups and our church, as we risk to give and receive love, we will not only be more effective witnesses, but we will be enabled to share our faith and we will be asked about our faith.

To love, though, we must first be loved. We cannot give what we have not received—we must, as we discovered in the first study, abide in Jesus and his love.

Meditation

Read John 13.1-17. You are Peter. For the last few days you have rushed from place to place. It is Spring and it is beginning to warm up. You come into the upper room – this is the Passover Feast, a high and holy celebration. There are no servants, no-one is allocated to clean the feet. You sit around and stare. Who will be the one who will give up? Who will acknowledge their inferior status? There is a movement to your left...finish the story.

How do you demonstrate practical, passionate, personal love to the followers of Jesus in this group?

Bible Study John 5 & 9

At the end of each of the previous studies we have spent time looking at how Jesus dealt with people.

Reflect on Jesus' time with:

Nicodemus

The Woman of Samaria

This study looks at a “failure” in Jesus’ ministry, a “failure” if success is the measure of all ministry. Read 5.1-15

1. What is the effect of all the detail in 5.1-2?

2. Imagine being an invalid for 38 years... How might it shape the way you look at life (v5)?

3. Why do you think Jesus asked: “if he wanted to get well” (v6)?

4. What prospect does the invalid have of accessing the healing power of the pool (v7)?

5. How do you think you would feel about the man who cured you (v8-9a)?

7. Suddenly in a situation that should be joyous, we see a fly in the ointment (v9b-13). What does Jesus, in v14, tell us about the man?

8. Why does the man tell the Jews it was Jesus who had made him well?

9. What do we ourselves understand of the pressures this man was under?

Read John 9

10. Fill in the following table, comparing and contrasting John Chapter 5 with John Chapter 9.

John 5	John 9

There is no doubt we're meant to see plenty to contrast in these two stories. The outcome of evangelism is always in God's hands. Our task is to be responsive and dependent.

Prayer

Break into prayer triplets and pray for the two unbelieving people each person in the group is seeking to love well. Share some of the details.

1. _____

a. _____

b. _____

2. _____

a. _____

b. _____

3. _____

a. _____

b. _____

Meditation

Read John 13-18 and fill in the appropriate section in Appendix 1

NOTES

Study 5

God's Story—My Story—Their Story



In reading John's Gospel there will be a number of features that you will have noted: that Jesus' ministry wasn't without conflicts and that Jesus promised his disciples if they lived like him they would have conflicts as well.

John 15:18 - 16:4 ¹⁸ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ He who hates me hates my Father as well. ²⁴ If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.' ²⁶ "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. ²⁷ And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. ¹⁶ "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. ² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. ³ They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.

Jesus' ministry is provocative; he often asks questions. This is a feature of his ministry that is not often taken into account—often as part of our evangelism training we do some apologetics. Apologetics is the study of how to answer tough questions. Jesus seems to turn this on its head. He asks

tough questions. His approach is not just to give information but rather he asks questions designed to create cracks in the apparently smooth surface of peoples lives. Cracks that are then exploited by the Spirit. Jesus' questions, to change the metaphor, are like a deep plough that breaks a hard surface to develop a more responsive place for God's story in their story.

We, as Christians need to ask questions of our atheist friends, our Buddhist family members etc about such things as tsunamis, death, birth, justice and judgement.

Questioning Evangelism

Randy Newman wrote a book called 'Questioning Evangelism' in 2004, published by Kregal, which provides a great way of developing conversations with non-Christians. Below are some quotes from the book followed by some exercises.

Page 27

I once did a study of how Jesus answered every question that was asked of Him in all four gospels. Answering a question with a question was the norm. A clear, concise, direct answer was a rarity.

Page 28

The frequently asked question of exclusivity arose, more an attack than a sincere inquiry.

"So, I suppose you think all those sincere followers of other religions are going to hell!"

"Do you believe in hell?" I responded.

He appeared as if he'd never seriously considered the possibility. He looked so puzzled, perhaps because he was being challenged when he thought that he was doing the challenging. After a long silence, he said, "No. I don't believe in hell. I think it's ridiculous."

Echoing his word choice, I said. Well then why are you asking me such a ridiculous question?"

I wasn't trying to be a wise guy. I simply wanted him to honestly examine the assumptions behind his own question. His face indicated that I had a good point, and that he was considering the issues of judgment, eternal

damnation, and God's righteousness for the first time in his life. The silence was broken by another questioner, who chimed in, "Well, I do believe in hell. Do you think everyone who disagrees with you is going there?"

I asked, "Do you think anyone goes there? Is Hitler in hell?" (Hitler has turned out to be a helpful, if unlikely, ally in such discussions.)

"Of course, Hitler's in hell."

"How do you think God decides who goes to heaven and who goes to hell? Does He grade on a curve?"

From there, the discussion became civil for the first time, and serious interaction about God's holiness, people's sinfulness, and Jesus' atoning work ensued. Answering questions with questions turned out to be a more effective, albeit indirect, way to share the gospel.

Pages 92-100

What about those who have never heard?

Sometimes the topic of intolerance leads people to enquire about the fate of those who've never heard the gospel. Although the question has no easy answer, the asking reveals that the logic of the gospel is getting through to the questioner.

People pose this question either as a smokescreen, an expression of confusion about the gospel, or a sincere inquiry about God's fairness. A few sample dialogues might prove instructive.

Scenario 1: The Question Posed as a Smokescreen

Some questioners really don't care about those who've never heard. They just want to get themselves off the hook by poking holes in our faith. Turning the question around is appropriate.

NON-CHRISTIAN: What about all the parts of the world that never heard this? Is God going to send them to them to hell just because they never had anybody to tell them?

CHRISTIAN: What do you think?

NON-CHRISTIAN: I don't know you tell me!

CHRISTIAN: Do you think God would just say, "Tough Luck"?

NON-CHRISTIAN: No. I think God is fairer than that. But you said Jesus is the only way.

CHRISTIAN: I agree with you that God is fair. So I'd think that God takes these kind of things into account.

NON-CHRISTIAN: But that's not what you said. You said, "The only way..."

CHRISTIAN: I know. But I'm not so sure that God has told us everything about how He takes care of every situation. I don't think He needs to. I'm sure that He'll do the right and fair thing. What He has made clear is how He'll judge people who have heard and have decided that they didn't want any part of Jesus.

NON-CHRISTIAN: That makes sense.

CHRISTIAN: So, how about you? You've heard about Jesus. What do you think about Him?

Scenario 2: The Question Expressing a Need for Clarifying the Gospel

NON-CHRISTIAN: If what you say is true, what is going to happen to people who've never heard about Jesus?

CHRISTIAN: What do you think?

NON-CHRISTIAN: I don't know it sounds like they're going to hell. But that doesn't seem fair.

CHRISTIAN: I think you're right that fairness is part of the issue. My understanding of the Bible is that God will judge people on what they do know, not on what they don't know.

NON-CHRISTIAN: That seems fair.

CHRISTIAN: But people know more than we think!

NON-CHRISTIAN: What do you mean?

CHRISTIAN: Let me first make sure that we're talking about the same thing. Let's step back and talk about God's judgement in general. Do you think anyone goes to hell?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Yes. I think that some people deserve to go there.

CHRISTIAN: So do I. Why do you think so?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Because they've done evil things or they've killed someone or something like that.

CHRISTIAN: Anything else?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Lots of things, like stealing or cheating.

CHRISTIAN: Would you say the Ten Commandments cover a lot of it?

NON-CHRISTIAN: Yeh.

CHRISTIAN: Me too. Have you broken any of the Ten Commandments?

NON-CHRISTIAN: I don't know. I don't think so.

CHRISTIAN: I know I have. I've taken the Lord's name in vain. I've put some things higher than God on my priority list.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Where's that in the Ten Commandments?

CHRISTIAN: It's the very first one! "You shall have no other gods before me."

NON-CHRISTIAN: Uh-oh.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah. Me, too. And if I take seriously the stuff Jesus said, then I'm guilty of murder and adultery too. He said that hatred or lust in our hearts is the place where murder and adultery begin.

NON-CHRISTIAN: So how does anyone go to heaven?

CHRISTIAN: Not by being good enough! If that were the case, heaven would be empty. I certainly don't think there'll be any bragging when people stand before a holy God.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I'm confused.

CHRISTIAN: Sorry. I didn't mean to mix you up. I just think that what the Bible says about grace is important.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Grace what do you mean by that?

CHRISTIAN: I'll tell you. But I don't want to ignore your question about those who haven't heard about Jesus. Let me tell you how I think anyone gets to heaven, and then we'll go back to people who haven't heard. How's that?

Scenario 3: The Question Poses as a Sincere Inquiry About the Fate of the Unevangelized

NON-CHRISTIAN: It sounds like you're saying that anyone who hasn't heard about Jesus is going to hell. That doesn't sound fair.

CHRISTIAN: You're right it doesn't. But maybe there's another way to look at the question.

NON-CHRISTIAN: How?

CHRISTIAN: Your question presupposes two things. One is that there actually is a message to hear. The second is that some people haven't heard it.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN: The Bible would say yes to the first presupposition—there is a message to hear. The second presupposition—there really aren't any people

haven't heard it.

NON-CHRISTIAN: You've got to be kidding me. There are millions of people who haven't heard about Jesus.

CHRISTIAN: Let's take one thing at a time. The Bible says there certainly is a message that everyone must hear. I'd summarize it in four points.

1. There is a loving, righteous, knowable God.
2. There's something about us that separates us from that God.
3. God has provided a means to reconcile us—Jesus' death on the cross.
4. Each person needs to trust in that means of reconciliation for him or herself.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I agree that summarizes the Christian message. I don't know if I buy it, but how can you say that everyone's heard it?

CHRISTIAN: Don't get ahead of me. Make sure you see what's behind this message. God has provided the means to reconcile people to Him. It's not people earning their way to God based on what they do. This is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I see that.

CHRISTIAN: The Bible says that every single person on the planet already knows the first two points of this four point outline. They see evidence of God in nature or in their own hearts (see Romans 1:19-20; Ps 19:1-2; Acts 14:15-17; Eccl. 3:11).

NON-CHRISTIAN: Okay. But what about point three and four?

CHRISTIAN: This requires a little bit of putting two and two together. But I think the Bible says that everyone either rejects or accepts points one or two. People look either at the stars or in their hearts and wonder, "Is there some kind of creator behind it all?" or the don't. They also look in their own hearts and say either, "I'm in trouble" or "I'm okay."

NON-CHRISTIAN: Where are you getting this from?

CHRISTIAN: I think the best place to study this is in the first two chapters of Romans in the New Testament. Maybe you should read it for yourself before we continue this conversation.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I will read it. But I'd like you to go on.

CHRISTIAN: Okay. I think that these two chapters argue that some people reject this little amount of revelation (that there is a God and that we fall short of His perfection) by suppressing it. If that's true, then it's not God who rejects them but they who reject God. It says they are without excuse.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Why would they suppress it?

CHRISTIAN: For the same reason that anyone rejects God. He's holy and

we're not. We'd rather not deal with a God who makes demands on us. That's why people like other gods—the ones that aren't so holy and demanding, or the ones that say we're not so accountable.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Okay. Stop your preaching. Suppose they don't suppress it?

CHRISTIAN: I don't think the God explicitly tells us how He's going to handle every situation, because that's His job, and He doesn't need to consult with us on anything.

NON-CHRISTIAN: That's a good way of putting it.

CHRISTIAN: It makes sense to me if you think of it like this: "Revelation rejected brings darkness; revelation received brings light."

NON-CHRISTIAN: You might have lost me there.

CHRISTIAN: If people reject the first two points of revelation, God is simply giving them what they asked for—a life separated from Him—darkness. They'll stay in darkness unless something radical happens. But for people who say, "Yes, there must be something bigger than me and I don't match up," I think God will get the rest of the story to them.

NON-CHRISTIAN: If they say yes to points one and two, he'll send them three and four?

CHRISTIAN: Yes.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Where does the Bible say that?

CHRISTIAN: Lots of places in the Bible says things such as, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13), or "You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you" (Ps. 9:10; see also 1 Chron. 28:9; 2 Chron. 15:2; 16:9; Ps. 145:18; Luke 19:10).

NON-CHRISTIAN: So, how does God get three and four to them?

CHRISTIAN: Most of the time it's through other people, but God is also capable of bringing the rest of the story any way he wants—through visions or dreams, for example.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Or other religions?

CHRISTIAN: I don't think so. If those other religions proclaimed these four points, well, then they wouldn't be other religions—they'd be Christianity! If they proclaimed something else, they'd be saying that it was some form of self-effort. That's exactly the opposite of Christianity.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Buddhism is self-effort?

CHRISTIAN: Yes. You achieve Nirvana by meditation or some other discipline. Every religion says some form of "Do this and you'll get there." They might describe "there" differently, and they have different lists of what

to do, but it's all self-effort.

NON-CHRISTIAN: Okay. You already gave me that works-versus-grace sermon.

CHRISTIAN: The bottom line is that I don't really know how God will get points three and four to someone, but His usual plan is for people to tell people. That's why there's so much in the Bible about people going all over the world to announce this message. That's why I'm telling you all of this.

NON-CHRISTIAN: I think I'll have to read that book of Romans.

Bible Study John 21:15-18 "Do You Love Me?"

Living in the light of God's Story in Jesus means that we take risks—risking to speak living words into dead lives, that may be rejected. But we don't always succeed, in fact, sometimes we don't speak. Probably for most of us there are times we remember when we did not stand up and side with Jesus. Probably for most of us even talking about evangelism can be a little awkward. The last part of John's gospel is just for us, but before we get there let's set the scene with Peter's self confident assertion in John 13

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." ³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

Jesus alerts the disciples to his imminent departure. On learning that he can't follow his Lord, Peter objects, he is prepared to lay down his life for Jesus. "Oh really," says Jesus, "in reality you will deny me three times." We move forward to John 18. Jesus has been arrested and taken to Caiaphas' house Peter has followed...

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." ¹⁸ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. ¹⁹ Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰ "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I

said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." ²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. ²³ "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" ²⁴ Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest. ²⁵ As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not." ²⁶ One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

As a witness, depending on his own abilities, Peter has proven hopeless—a man just like us. There is no attempt to portray him any other than what he is, afraid and easily intimidated.

How Peter felt we can only speculate, but it would not be hard to imagine him feeling an absolute failure. In the middle of the last breakfast with the other disciples, Jesus draws the thorn of guilt from Peter's soul and reinstates him and recommissions him.

John 21:15-18 ¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

1. Why does Jesus make a connection three times between loving him and feeding or caring for his sheep John 15:10-12?

2. Jesus asks Peter a second and third time if he loves him. Why is "Peter hurt because Jesus asked him a third time."?

3. What is Jesus doing here with Peter's heart?

4. What does Jesus dealing with Peter mean for you?

5. Peter will still have to face his fears eventually. How v19?

6. What do you feel like doing when you fail as a witness for Jesus?

7. What is healthy about John's Gospel ending this way?

What do you need Jesus to say to you to strengthen and 'reinstate' you?

Prayer

Break into prayer triplets and pray for the two unbelieving people each person in the group is seeking to love well. Share some of the details.

1. _____

a. _____

b. _____

2. _____

a. _____

b. _____

3. _____

a. _____

b. _____

Meditation

Read John 19-21 and fill in the appropriate section in Appendix 1

Appendix 1

John	God's Story	My Story	My Friend's Story
Ch 1			
Ch 2			
Ch 3			
Ch 4			
Ch 5			
Ch 6			
Ch 7			

John	God's Story	My Story	My Friend's Story
Ch 8			
Ch 9			
Ch 10			
Ch 11			
Ch 12			
Ch 13			
Ch 14			

John	God's Story	My Story	My Friend's Story
Ch 15			
Ch 16			
Ch 17			
Ch 18			
Ch 19			
Ch 20			
Ch 21			

Appendix 2

Dialogues Of The Deaf

"It is impossible to overemphasise the immense needs humans have to be listened to. Listen to all the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between people. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf."
Paul Tournier

I have just come from a very enjoyable few hours of conversation with a man who is in the process of making enormous changes in his life. He has given me permission to tell something of his story. I want to try to piece together some rough ideas about what I have come to see as perhaps the most underrated, and rarely used human ability. Every one of us could learn to develop this, but tragically, very few do -- I mean the art of listening. I sometimes wonder how few of us ever really experience another person actually listening to us, let alone for a sustained period. It becomes so easy to settle for less.

I respect this man a great deal, although he would say, I think, that he finds that hard to comprehend, for he is very aware of his current and past failures, and the potential for even greater ones in the future. He is on the verge of remarrying his ex-wife, from whom he has been estranged for some 12 years. He will seek before God to develop the kind of intimacy that requires daily dependence on the grace of God and the best effort humans are capable of. Can you begin to imagine what kinds of deep personal fears, inadequacies and uncertainties must lurk like unwelcome intruders in the recesses of his mind and consciousness? Can you imagine the ambivalence of resetting a direction in the face of enormous self-doubt? He asked me to have a meal with him so he could show me the "Speech of the Groom" he is preparing for the wedding reception. He wants to memorise it and look people in the eye. The path he has walked in his life is littered with failure, brokenness, anger, betrayal, regret, insecurity -- the potential list of words could keep you busy with your dictionary and thesaurus for hours, but every one of those words throbs for him with a pulsating internal reality that has robbed him of the joy of knowing himself to be a man made in the image and likeness of God.

Yet as I looked with him at the words he is shaping months in advance, I was

struck by the thought that perhaps in the thousands of similar speeches that might be uttered in this country this year, this one may be almost unique. Certainly in my experience it is extremely rare. Wedding speeches are so often rather delightfully forgettable are they not? I doubt many will easily forget some of the words that are emerging from the ruins of this man's life. Here is a man facing with a measure of broken integrity a pathway that he, and others who knew him, would have considered totally impossible only a short time ago. He has known what it is to stand on the very precipice of self destruction for quite a long time. He told me that it would be impossible to overemphasise the fact that under God he owes his life to a few people who did listen to him. He said, "I'd be dead today if no one had listened. There are a few people I owe my very life to. I knew I was falling into a deep pit, and there was nothing I could do to stop the process of total disaster."

"...if no one had listened." But we are talking about a very special kind of listening. In the face of the deepest pain of the human spirit, what is required is a willingness to move towards another person with openness, sensitivity and genuine compassion, NOT as the one who "knows" and can dispense comfort and advice from some kind of detached and safe distance. That kind of listening just won't do the job. What is required by the listener is nothing less than a willingness to know and be known without being defensive or judgmental. What is required is a willingness to be exposed, known, to be a person who will be there in the face of powerlessness, rage, despair, uncertainty, or who knows what?

"Listening means immersing oneself in the world of another human being" Hans H. Strupp and Jeffrey L. Binder, "Psychotherapy in a New Key", Basic Books, 1984.

I spend my time divided between listening to those who are troubled, and training others to do the same. I have come to the conclusion that listening is very difficult! "Listening" in my mind is not the same thing as "hearing". Yet even hearing can be difficult at times, can't it? One of our greatest barriers to listening is that we think we already do it well enough, that it's not difficult, and therefore we don't need to work at it. No one listens well all the time. And we will never listen well if we don't want to, or are self-absorbed in some way —not only because of things like sickness, stress, or discomfort, but more significantly because of our own internal agenda which promotes defensiveness.

It takes a great deal of energy to really listen. It is very tiring. And it can never be faked. There almost seems to be an unwritten rule of adult interaction that we agree together to pretend. "Let's pretend we're listening, although both of us really know we're not." Perhaps we know deep down that to really listen would require us to face things internally that we'd rather not face. We may know ourselves to be afraid, angry, uncertain, powerless, selfish, ignorant or even foolish. But who wants to see their neighbour as an invitation to have that revealed? Listening is precisely such an invitation, for to listen well means there is no place to hide. What is going on inside the listener will be known by the other at some intuitive level as surely as if it were flashing in neon lights from our forehead. In fact, perhaps the real test of listening is what we do precisely at the point where our own comfort levels are being challenged. Who wants to be known in that way? Not many it seems. The easier choice is to get by with pretending. So we settle for less, we settle for the "dialogues of the deaf."

"To 'listen' to
another's soul
into a condition
of disclosure
and discovery
may be almost
the greatest
service that any
human being
ever performs
for another".

Douglas Steere

John S. Webb
Executive Director, Tanglewood Ministries, Sydney

