

# His Story My Story

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him  
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

**Romans 15:13**

by Linda Lesniewski

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*A Note from the Author: God can draw from all of our life experiences to connect with others in everyday conversations. This six-week study uses the stories of obscure Bible characters to prompt memories of your own life experiences. Each week you'll be asked to select one event to discover how God has used it, how God has redeemed it, and how He has comforted you within it. Using this study with a small group of women allows stories to have immediate impact on one another. Working through it as a private journey offers rich times of reflection as you discover God's love and redemptive work where you least expect it!*

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## His Story My Story

### Introduction

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13.)*

Next time you're in a restaurant, at work, on the playground, or in line at the store, stop and listen. Chances are you'll hear a story. People share stories. Human civilization is based on communication through stories. Cave drawings of early man and the hieroglyphics of ancient civilizations tell stories that both connect us to the past and provide perspective on our current existence.

The Bible is a book of stories. Even the genealogies of Numbers and the laws of Leviticus are presented in story format. Amazingly, our experiences as Christians are continuations of the biblical story of grace and redemption. Our stories are extensions of the stories of those who have come before us. In the same way their earlier stories encourage us, our stories will do the same for those who come after us providing anchors as they chart their own spiritual course.

Have you ever wondered how *your* story fits into God's eternal plan? That's the question we'll explore together. Imagine seeing your story as God's way of sharing His amazing story of love, grace, and redemption. I am overwhelmed with feelings both exhilarating and sobering. God has demonstrated these truths in tangible ways in your life. In turn, your life provides proof of the underlying intangible concepts to the hurting and lost world around you. When you fail to share how God has worked to reveal His grace and power in your life, you limit His work in others' lives.

We read about Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 3:15 to believers suffering under Roman rule and persecution. Their responses should be different than those of the unbelievers around them. Because of that, Peter exhorted them to always be ready to share the hope they had in Christ. That hope would certainly include what we today call a personal testimony of salvation. But it *also* encompasses the hope we have as we face our personal challenges, our own stories of hope. These stories are scattered throughout our lives. The more we collect, the more we have to share. What a wonderful way to bring glory to God—to be ready at all times to share the hope we have because of what He has done and is doing uniquely for us.

This study is designed to launch you on a life-long journey of collecting and sharing stories. We'll begin by gathering stories from the past. We'll continue with stories that illustrate God's grace and ability to redeem our losses just like He redeemed us with His salvation. You'll look for God and the hope His presence brings to your experience. How were you strengthened by God's Word? How has God redeemed your loss? How did He communicate to you that He was there with you? By adding spiritual truth, each account moves from factually interesting to eternally impacting!

I can hear some of you thinking, "Others have interesting stories. My life is so ordinary and my days so boring! Telling my stories would just generate yawns." Not so! Your life feels ordinary because you're so familiar with it! When viewed from another's perspective, your experiences are engaging. On the other extreme, perhaps you feel too much shame or embarrassment to share the chaos of your life. Don't allow your anxieties to stop you from taking this journey. You'll be asked to write whatever you choose or choose not to, and to share on whatever level you're comfortable with. Everyone gets to move at their own pace. This journey is not intended to be a therapeutic experience but a grand adventure of discovery. Just think, God's handprints are all over your life. Relax. Your journey-mates and God's tender Holy Spirit will help you through any rough spots you might encounter

You'll learn to be authentic in what you share. Authenticity honors God and creates connections with others, especially the younger generations. You'll also increase your awareness of God's hand in your daily life as you learn to see stories all around you

throughout each day. You'll also learn a fundamental Biblical principle—the God of hope provides hope in our heart through the power of His Holy Spirit. Hope doesn't come from our human hearts but is a product of a life empowered by God's Spirit. We have to be willing to allow God to work within our hearts, moving aside our human desires and replacing them with hope—knowledge that God is in control, He will not abandon nor forsake us, and He'll redeem the experience for our good and His glory.

We'll be using stories of women in Scripture to provide a framework for our journey during these six weeks. I've chosen somewhat obscure incidents to increase the possibility of discovering fresh spiritual truths from God's Word and to validate each life no matter how insignificant it may seem. After studying four different Bible characters on days one through four of each week, you'll then write your own story on day five. Everyone in the group will have an opportunity to share what they wrote each week. Remember, it's actually sharing your story that brings glory to God and hope and encouragement to others—just as you'll receive a blessing from hearing theirs. The nervousness of the first week will quickly give way to eager anticipation of each story the following week.

You'll need a notebook or a journal to write your own story on day five. If you prefer, consider using your computer for journaling. Some believe, though, that the speed of handwriting slows down your mental processing to a rate where it's easier to “figure things out.” You might try both before deciding on the format best for you. Are you ready? Let's begin this “journey that lasts a lifetime!”

# Week One

## The Influence of a Story

### Day 1: Anna's Story

We begin by looking at a Biblical story of a woman you might say qualifies for that “boring life” category mentioned earlier. Read in Luke 2:21-40 about the Temple scene in Jerusalem where we get a glimpse of Anna's faith.

Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day, most likely in the synagogue in Bethlehem. On the thirty-third day after His birth, they brought Him to Jerusalem for His dedication and Mary's purification. Leviticus 12:4-8 provided the laws devout Jewish women like Mary followed for purification following childbirth.

In our passage, we read first about a righteous and devout man named Simeon whom the Holy Spirit drew to the Temple courts. It was there he saw Jesus. Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God. It's a very moving scene followed by yet another historic moment. An elderly woman named Anna came up to this young family at that very instant. She also praised God, but then spoke about the infant Jesus to all those around her who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah.

We see two aged people, Simeon who praised God for having seen the Messiah and Anna who made the first public announcement to those in the Temple about His presence! What a glorious moment in time. What an amazing opportunity to get a glimpse of prophecy being fulfilled. We most likely know about it through Mary's telling it to Luke who recorded it in his Gospel. Anna's longing to see the coming of the Messiah, the realization that this infant *was* the Messiah, the flood of emotions she must have felt, and the look in Mary's eyes as she prophesied are all part of Anna's story. Wouldn't you love to read an account of this event written from Anna's point of view? Wow! Now, that's the power of story. Let's begin!

#1. Anna's life-style choices might surprise you. Name a time your own decisions surprised your family.

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#2. Anna chose to not remarry even though her marriage lasted only a few short years. That's a big decision every widow must bring to the Lord for guidance. How has your life been touched by the way a widow faced her future?

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#3. Anna wanted those worshiping at the Temple to share in that amazing moment. She didn't want to keep it for herself. Name a time the faith of someone you knew influenced yours.

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#4. Anna served in the Temple and related to those who were "looking forward to the coming of the Messiah." She daily created an environment for others' faith to grow. Believers today serve the body of Christ through their spiritual gifts and the passion their gift provides to their lives. What focus do you see in your own life? Name a recent time that you took action based on your giftedness.

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#5. Anna's proclamation added to Mary's growing list of things to ponder in her heart. This was only forty days\* following the shepherd's visit and story of the angel's message to them. Anna spoke truth to them about their son, Jesus. What truth spoken to you recently has caused you to spend time in reflection?

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## Day 2: An Outsider's Story

Read in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30 about a woman deemed unimportant to Jews. Perhaps you've heard her referred to as the Syro-Phoenician woman or the Canaanite woman.

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\* See Leviticus 12:1-8 for purification guidelines

I wince at the exchange between Jesus and this distraught woman. She obviously understood something we miss. She realized Jesus would not want to associate with a non-Jew. She represented the pagans God told the Jews to eliminate when they conquered the Promised Land. Because of this, she had no inherent right to expect Jesus to help her; yet, she had heard of His miracles and stood steady in her request. Even verse 23 of Matthew shocks us, since it indicates Jesus was ignoring her crying out to Him! He does respond though, and tests her heart with His words. Kneeling before Him, she responds with her resolute yet humble request. This Canaanite woman sought Jesus and requested help based on who *Jesus* was, not who *she* was.

Years ago I participated in a study that guided women to write a statement of their life purpose. Many of us found it very helpful. Several women, though, weren't able to complete the assignment. When I met with them I discovered they were stuck on the chapter entitled "Significance". They had experienced personal traumas in their past that prevented them from seeing their life as worthwhile. Their faulty logic created a faulty perspective. "If I'm insignificant, then what significance could a purpose statement have?"

If you feel that your life is unimportant, I'd like to suggest you'll probably feel your stories are unimportant too. I'm asking you to move forward in faith, asking God to challenge that lie and replace it with the truth of your unlimited value to God. Such re-programming is a work of the Holy Spirit. It takes time, but it is possible. This study provides an excellent venue for you to begin the process. Hang in there and give God permission to begin your *de*-programming so He can *re*-program with the truth of His Word!

#1. Name a time you needed assistance yet felt you were not worthy of asking. Write down a few phrases describing the circumstances.

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#2. America is a melting pot of nationalities. The Jewish nation had moved in on the Canaanite's territory making the Canaanites the minority. In fact, the word "minority" has its own cultural meaning here in America. Do you or someone you know struggle with being a part of the minority? What are the circumstances?

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#3. What does God say about us in Luke 12:22-28? With that in mind, think through "where God was" during a time of feeling insignificant. Did you

believe the world's lies or God's truth about you in that experience? Did you even know the truth of His love for you at that time?

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#4. How did God work to bring you through a time of feeling unimportant? What spiritual truth do you see in your story? If you aren't able to pinpoint God's presence, ask Him to reveal that to you. He will! He's just been waiting for you to ask!

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#5. The desperation that would prompt a woman to boldly state, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" is painful to think about. What personal story does this phrase bring to mind?

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### **Day 3: A Hopeless Woman's Story**

The human condition hasn't changed much from the day God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden. Since a world of hunger, disease, and death still exists, our stories addressing those issues remain especially relevant.

A hopeless and nameless widow lived in an inland city named Zarephath located on the road to the coastal city of Tyre. Even though this city was near the Mediterranean Sea, no rain had fallen and people were starving. Read about this widow's experience in 1 Kings 17:7-24.

Now read in Luke 4:25-26, how Jesus used this same Old Testament narrative as He taught in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. We might easily miss the implication in His telling of the story. The listeners in the synagogue did not! Jesus pointed out that there were many hungry Jewish widows during the famine, but Elijah was sent to a *Gentile* widow. Jesus implies that if He's rejected in His home town, He'll go minister to others—just as Elijah had done. It infuriated the listeners so much to hear Jesus speak this way that they took Him to the edge of a hill to throw Him off. Jesus

simply walked away from the raucous crowd and left, for it wasn't yet time for Him to die. I'm confident this widow never thought Jesus would use the spiritual truths of her story in His teachings. Well, get ready! He'll be using yours too!

#1. Describe this woman's painful reality. We're blessed if we've never experienced starvation or the death of a child; but much of the world has and continues to face such dire circumstances. We do face other types of life-threatening circumstances such as cancer. What life-threatening reality has impacted your life or the life of someone you love?

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#2. Imagine the conversation (or lack of conversation) between her and her son as she left to gather firewood. Do you think she was weeping or resolute as she searched for limbs for a small fire? People respond to a crisis in a wide variety of ways. Describe your unanticipated response to a crisis, big or small.

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#3. What type of trust would it take for her to respond to the prophet's request that she was to feed him first, before she fed herself or her son? Sometimes God pushes us beyond where we can humanly go. Briefly describe an instance in your life where God pushed you beyond your ability to respond in your own strength.

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#4. God makes a way for this widow. He continues to do the same for us. Name a time God did something just as miraculous for you as He made a way during a time of despair in your life.

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#5. We're thinking about how stories influence us this week. How did reflecting on this one woman's story influence the way you look at your own stories?

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#### **Day 4: A Nanny's story**

Perhaps you've noticed that descriptions of God in Scripture are often wrapped in story format. We discover truths in dialogue, in poetry, and in narratives. To read that God is love has very limited meaning without a context for understanding how His love is expressed and experienced in real time—hence, the power of story.

Read the very brief story of a child's caregiver in 2 Samuel 4:4.

Knowing some of the background helps us understand this situation. 2 Samuel 3:1 states: "The war between the house of Saul and the house of David was long and drawn out with David growing stronger and the house of Saul becoming weaker" HCSB. When Saul and Jonathan died in battle, Saul's rule ended. Those who worked for him at the palace fled when they heard the news.

Imagine the scene of a responsible nursemaid and a five year old boy. Sense her fear and panic. See them hurrying down a flight of stairs or a rocky road, possibly at night with or without the benefit of a torch or oil lamp. Think through the fall and her anguish over his injury and pain. Feel the additional effort required to get an injured child to safety. Dwell a minute on the days that followed the injury and the extensive care he required. Linger for a while over the life-long guilt and sadness as well as the what-ifs and if-onlys that this nursemaid surely struggled with.

In verse 12 of 2 Samuel 9:12 we learn this child's name, Mephibosheth. We also discover he now had a son named Mica. Because of this, we can assume around ten or more years had passed. Perhaps his childhood nanny never lived to see this amazing day. Or, maybe she was part of Ziba's household referred to as servants of Mephibosheth. We don't know for sure since she's not mentioned again. Regardless, the night the child fell and injured his feet wasn't the end of the story.

#1. Think about Mephibosheth receiving this offer of a life-time of care and provision from David, Israel's new king. We all love receiving good news! Name a time you received unexpected joyful news.

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#2. God demonstrated love and care to a crippled man through His servant David. We can *see* God's love demonstrated in "real time" in the context of this story. It gives tangible meaning to the words children memorize, "God is love." The Hebrew word for what David wanted to demonstrate in verse one is "hesed" meaning loyal love. God's loyal love is also demonstrated in a multitude of ways through our own stories. Name a time you could "see" God's love in your life.

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#3. An unearned gift can create a variety of emotions. We often feel more comfortable paying someone back or reciprocating a gift. When did you receive a gift that you felt you didn't deserve? Note how you felt.

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#4. I once had a grandmother share her angst over caring for a grandchild who fell out of the highchair. She felt negligent and guilt-ridden even though the child wasn't seriously injured. Jot down an accident that occurred under your "watch".

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#5. Learning how to reconcile accidents with God's sovereignty and His grace is one of the most difficult tasks of faith. Briefly describe an accident that caused you to question God's love.

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## Day 5: My Story

From reading and thinking through this week's stories of Anna, the Canaanite woman, the Gentile widow, and young Mephibosheth and his nursemaid, it's easy to see why God wanted us to know their stories! Even though we've only briefly examined their lives and the spiritual richness they bring to our own, I hope you're convinced that you've begun an exciting adventure of collecting your own stories for God to use as He chooses!

Review the personal stories you profiled on days 1-4 and choose one to develop more thoroughly. (If you're an adventurer, feel free to work through more than one!) Set a goal of writing several paragraphs or several pages. As you record your experience, include moments you were aware of God's presence. How did He encourage, protect or bless you? What other ways did you see God reveal Himself during your personal struggle? Perhaps you'll conclude God wanted to teach you something new about Himself. Answering these types of questions adds the "spiritual nougat or spiritual truth" to your story. Remember, our stories alone might be interesting or enriching, but unless we're able to include spiritual truth and scriptural principles they lack the ability to have an eternal impact on others. Including a verse of scripture or a Biblical story as a reference point draws the hearer even closer to the Lord.

Consider a simple framework to work from. Don't let these suggestions limit the ways you approach your experience. Use them instead to launch you forward in your thinking and writing!

The situation *as I remember it*.  
How I experienced it *personally*.  
How God *used it in my life*.

I've included a personal example in Appendix 1, if you'd like more assistance with ideas. If you choose to read any of the stories in the appendix, remember that these stories have been polished and edited. Please don't feel the need to bring a polished story with you each week...a rough draft will do!

If you discover today or in the days ahead that some stories are more difficult to piece together than others, just persevere. You're not writing for publication. You're simply collecting precious gifts to place at your Savior's feet—gifts He can use as He wills to encourage, strengthen, exhort, comfort, instruct, or most of all, give hope to others as they discover who God is.

Can a story still have value while you're waiting to hear from God? Yes! You demonstrate your trust in a loving Father and the hope within you when you share your story. You acknowledge that you're trusting God to redeem your experience and be glorified—all in God's perfect timing. If you're not able to add that spiritual nougat just yet, that's okay. You can rest in God's promise in Hebrews 11:6 that "... (God) rewards those who seek Him."

Ask God to reveal Himself, and He will! You'll discover all sorts of blessings in this treasure hunt. Remember those all important questions, "Where were You in this, God?" "What do You want me to know about You in this situation?" "What truth am I missing?" "How are you redeeming this experience in my life?" Then expect an answer! Listen for His voice in the days ahead. Often when you least expect it, He'll answer. You'll have an "a-ha" moment when you comprehend what God was accomplishing. Scripture will suddenly apply to your story. God might use a song, a sermon, or a friend's

insight to answer your questions. God speaks in a myriad of ways. All you need to do is ask and be ready to receive. Finding God in your story transforms words on a page into a precious love offering for the Lord to use in the life of another person—all for His glory.

## Week Two

### Our Earliest Stories

Children's books and cards attempt to capture the ideal world of childhood—imaginary friends and talking animals. Even though few of us experienced such a carefree lifestyle, we all wish we had. We actually had very little control over our little-girl world. We had no say-so in whom God chose for our parents or for our brothers and sisters. We didn't get to select our nationality, ethnicity, home town, school, economic level, I.Q., gender, temperament, birth date, or family religion. A sovereign God determined much of our family identity. We did, though, get to choose how we responded to the world around us. We still do. One author describes our responses as co-authoring our life with God.<sup>†</sup>

Perhaps you've had that fleeting thought, *What if I'd been born in Africa to parents who died of AIDS?* The reality is we could have been. However, through God's sovereignty, we have a different set of circumstances to work with, and God wants to use those exact dynamics to draw us to Him. The very design of our life equips us to accomplish His purposes in the world. One day He'll ask us to give account of our stewardship of all the blessings He's entrusted to us. Are we willing to also act as stewards of the hard things as well?

We'll be studying four different accounts of family life in Scripture this week. We'll observe the positive and the negative. We'll learn that God can be glorified by both. Perhaps these selections will remind you of some of your own life experiences. In Day Five you'll have an opportunity to choose one of your own stories and discover how God wants to use it. We begin with an unlikely topic—Jesus' half sisters. What an interesting family those baby girls grew up in!

#### **Day One: Half sisters of Jesus—Living with a Perfect Older Brother**

We have enough references in the New Testament to Jesus' brothers and sisters to know He came from a large family. Many believe Jesus was the eldest of as many as eight children. Because Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit rather than by Joseph, we call His siblings half brothers and sisters. We have no indication at the time of His crucifixion that any of them believed in Him as the promised Messiah. In fact, as the Feast of Tabernacles approached, Jesus' brothers mockingly suggested that He go to Jerusalem to perform miracles for everyone to see. *Leave here and go to Judea so Your disciples can see Your works that You are doing. For no one does anything in secret while he's seeking public recognition. (For not even His brothers believed in Him)* (John 7:3-5). Their words clearly communicate their lack of understanding of His mission. It's great to know, though, that one half brother, James, eventually lead the church in Jerusalem. Most believe he also wrote the New Testament book of James.

We have fewer actual accounts of Jesus' sisters. Read two of them in Mk. 3:13-35 and 6:1-6. One occurs in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and the other in their hometown of Nazareth. After you've read these passages, answer the questions below. You might be surprised at how familiar some of these family dynamics feel today!

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<sup>†</sup> Dan Allender, *To Be Told* (Waterbrook, 2005)

#1. We don't know if Mary ever spoke of the circumstances of Jesus' birth, but his sisters surely noticed that *perfect older brother*. Do you feel a special status was given by your parents to you or one of your siblings? Give an example of why or why not.

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#2. Family interventions provide strategies for dealing with a member struggling with self destructive behaviors. Jesus' mother, brothers, and sister walked a long way to locate Jesus for such an intervention. Jesus basically ignored his family's request and, instead, used the occasion to redefine His relationship to them. These family members had limited understanding of what Jesus was about. We often feel that same way in our relationship with Jesus today. Identify a time you felt like you didn't understand what Jesus was doing in your life.

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#3. Relationships between brothers and sisters are complex even without adoption or blended family dynamics. As you read about Jesus' family, think of an instance you had to work through a complicated family dynamic. If you don't have siblings, reflect on relationships with cousins or other key family members.

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#4. Is there a brother or sister you tried to emulate? Record an example that stands out in your memory.

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#5. Do you feel as if you lived up to your parent's expectations? Record an incident where you were affirmed by either a parent, grandparent, or teacher.

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### **Day Two: Tamar's Story—When the Unexpected Shatters Your Life**

Tamar's story is a heartbreaker. Unfortunately, far too many young girls can identify with it. Tamar and Absalom were brothers and sisters born to one of several of David's wives. Additional wives and their children, half brothers and sisters, lived in homes close by David's palace in Jerusalem. With this complex family dynamic in mind, stop and read the account of Tamar and one of her half brothers in II Samuel 13:1-39.

Tamar's half brother premeditated her rape. She was victimized by circumstances beyond her control. Tamar must have wrestled with many thoughts of "if only" in her grief. In a moment in time, her life forever changed. My heart aches every time I reflect on this story. Perhaps you've heard interpretations that focused on Absalom's simmering anger and his mad pursuit of his sister's assailant. Maybe the teaching pointed out King David's parental grief and the ensuing disruption and drama in the household. Attention seldom falls on Absalom's words in the latter part of Verse 21, "Be quiet for now, my sister. He is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." Absalom seems to minimize Tamar's pain in an attempt to calm her. The following phrase, though, is particularly distressing, "So Tamar lived as a desolate woman in the house of her brother Absalom."

We hear a common phrase "It's not fair!" among children. No matter how long we live, the unfairness of life haunts us. One day the scales will be balanced between good and evil—at the white throne judgment.<sup>‡</sup> Until then, we must remind ourselves that the sin committed by Amnon toward Tamar caused the agony Christ experienced when He became sin on the cross. Christ gave His own life for that very sin. The hope that truth provides allows us to go forward when "life is not fair."

#1. We never get to hear Tamar's story from her mother's perspective. She was like many women today, voiceless. Imagine her hurt and confusion. We can assume she voiced blame, but blame doesn't resolve conflict. Describe a time you blamed someone or someone blamed you.

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<sup>‡</sup> Revelation 20:1-15.

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#2. Some scholars interpret the word “desolate” to mean “unmarried”. Tamar had reached a marriageable age with all the exciting prospects of a beautiful king’s daughter. In an instant, those dreams vanished. Amnon’s refusal to marry her (which was allowable then) enhanced the insult. Tamar entered the house as King David’s beautiful obedient daughter. She left the room as a powerless, ravaged victim. Identify a time you felt powerless.

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#3. We learn by suffering consequences. Amnon suffered immensely at the hands of Absalom. Consequences rippled through the lives of other family members as well, including Tamar’s father, King David. Record something you suffered as the result of another family member’s actions.

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#4. Now that you’re older and have hindsight, how would you counsel someone in a situation similar situation to the one you mentioned in question three?

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#5. In what ways have you discovered the hope and strength available through Jesus Christ? If you have not already done so, ask God to redeem this event for His glory and to move you to a place of healing. The Psalms offer a healing place to find refuge with your heavenly Father. If your personal experience stirs up intense emotional pain, seek out a Christian counselor who can offer wisdom and guidance as you navigate the healing currents of grief.

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### Day Three: A Sick Little Girl—Grief Takes Action

Today we'll spend time with a frantic father and a very sick daughter. We'll approach the weighty topics of life and death just briefly—through a glimpse of Jesus interacting with a family in crisis. This family had no ambulances, emergency rooms, or hospitals for their child. They had only herbs, olive oil, clean bandages, cool water, a bed or pallet, and prayer. A fortunate few also had access to Jesus. Read about this encounter with Jesus in three different passages: Matt. 9:18-26; Mk. 5:21-43; and Lk. 8:41-56. If you're a mother, place yourself right in the desperate middle of the moment back home at the bedside of the child.

Sickness and dying provoke unspoken questions—even in the hearts of the aged saints. Just recently I interacted with a godly woman with a legacy of faith. A year ago, she and her dear friend sat together receiving chemo treatments for their respective cancers. She was now in remission, but her friend lay on her deathbed. "Why is God taking her and leaving me?" she asked. This precious woman knew the answer, but she needed to hear my words. "Your friend's work on earth is completed; yours isn't." Her humble response? "I so want to be worthy of this extra time God has granted me."

#1. Children seldom escape childhood without at least one serious illness or accident. Finding God's hand in suffering is an important quest. This little unnamed girl's sickness provided an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate His miraculous powers, a testimony to His divinity. When was the last time you sought God's intervention in a child's life?

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#2. Within a very short time span we observe the father's desperation, then hear the mourners' lament followed by their incredulous laughter and eventual rejoicing. Not all illnesses end that way. Turn from this little girl's room to nearby homes and villages where other sick people lay. Perhaps they hadn't heard of Jesus' healing powers or weren't able to travel to where He was. Write down a time you or someone in your family asked and, like Paul,<sup>§</sup> didn't receive it.

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<sup>§</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

#3. Describe a childhood illness, accident, or trauma and how it affected your life.

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#4. Who talked about your illness with you? Describe how you understood what was happening at the time.

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#5. Do you have any lingering questions about “where God was” during this time? If so, take time to voice those to Him right now.

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#### **Day Four: Rebecca’s Story—The Big “I Do”**

You’re probably ready for an upbeat story, perhaps one of intrigue and romance. I sure am! If you’re thinking that romance and marriage don’t fit within this week’s topic of our earliest stories, you’re wrong. Most girls married in both the Old and New Testament times between the ages of twelve to fifteen. Today we consider adolescent girls as children, but we all vividly recall crushes and our first love during those years!

Our story takes place among pagan Canaanites where Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac lived, people not suitable for Abraham’s son to marry. Abraham had recently buried his wife Sarah, and his focus now turns to finding a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham’s strategy for locating a daughter-in-law unfolds in Chapter 24 of Genesis. It’s that romantic story we’re ready for. Stop now to read this intriguing account.

The idea of arranged marriages jolts our sensibilities. We expect to “marry the one we love.” In Rebekah’s world, you “loved the one you married”! Her offer to draw enough water for a stranger’s thirsty camels shocks us. She even seems to do it cheerfully. Maybe that’s why Abraham’s servant chose that gesture as a sign—it would be so out of the ordinary. Rebekah’s spontaneous action had more significance than she realized. It had the power to change her life forever.

Don't you wish the chapter ended with a postscript stating, "And they lived happily ever after!" Unfortunately, that's not the case. You might want to read further about their marriage. Rebekah had twin boys with opposite personalities. Deception and favoritism crept into their family, and Isaac became blind. Maybe that's why we long so much for romance—it seems to disappear too quickly. The challenges of building a healthy and intimate relationship require on-going hard work after the romance wanes.

#1. Rebekah's offer to water the camels indicates an energetic and spontaneous personality. What adolescent, spur-of-the-moment action can you remember that had a big influence in the direction your life took?

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#2. Rebekah's willingness to leave with Abraham's servant and marry someone she'd never met amazes us. Name something you did in the name of romance that surprises you even today.

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#3. Did you notice the length of Isaac and Rebekah's courtship? Perhaps Abraham provided an elaborate wedding ceremony with Rebekah's maidservants serving as bridesmaids. Maybe the reception continued for days. Or, maybe it happened just as Verse 67 states, "And Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah and took Rebekah to be his wife." So much for courtship! Provide an example of your own courtship or wedding. If you're not married, record your "dream courtship and wedding".

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#4. Perhaps Isaac taking Rebekah into his deceased mother's tent seems a little eerie to us. Then again, maybe it wouldn't if we'd been able to peek into Isaac's bachelor tent! Maybe we're dealing with just a figure of speech. Regardless, almost overnight Rebekah had stepped into a very important family position vacated by Sarah's death. Rebekah now shared the responsibility of helping to fulfill God's covenant with Abraham—building a nation of people that

worshiped Him alone. Name some of the pressure and responsibilities you felt as a new bride.

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#5. The Genesis account of Rebekah’s family seems to imply her father had died since her older brother interacted as the man of the house. Her mother asked for just ten more days with Rebekah before she left, but that didn’t happen. After all, the groom was waiting! Rebekah’s mother and her brother released her knowing they might never see Rebekah again. Write a few sentences about the way your family responded to your choice to leave home, whether for schooling or for marriage, or just for the sake of independence.

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### **Day Five: My Story**

This week you peeked through the window of a large family with an unusual oldest son, a blended family where a half brother wrecked the life of his half sister through rape, a leader’s family with a very sick little girl, and a beautiful bride of a son raised as an only child. I imagine these stories prodded multiple memories of your own family life.

We began the week acknowledging no one grows up in the perfect family, but many of us did enjoy healthy loving homes. We also recognize that families do fall along a broad spectrum of functionality. Some families are such dangerous places that children must be removed. Sadly, children don’t even survive long enough in some to be rescued. Other children may reach adulthood but carry deep emotional wounds with them. No matter what type of family your earliest memories come from, God will use it in your life to accomplish something beautiful—something beyond your current believability.

Reflect on the personal vignettes you noted in days one through four and prayerfully ask the Lord which one He wants you to spend additional time developing. If your story happens to fall on the painful side of the family spectrum, then you’ll have additional work to do. If you can’t see how God has already begun to redeem it, then give Him permission to begin that spiritual transformation. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is within you if you know Jesus Christ as your Savior. Just as Christ died and lives again, so can you. You can choose to die to the pain, and release its hold over you. You can begin to discover the freedom of new life in Christ as you move forward into what He has for you today. Hope for your heart is available. Even if it feels impossible, nothing is impossible with God!

Use the three-part writing template if you need help getting started: The situation *as I remember it*, how I experienced it *personally*, and how God *used it or is using it in my life*. Remember, it is okay if you aren't able to answer the question, "How is God using it in my life?" Write your story as it is, then ask for spiritual eyes to see what He has already done and for willingness to release it into His creative care. Trust that God will do something beautiful.

## Week Three

### Finding God in our Stories

This week we'll focus on the most critical part of our stories, God's presence. Don't start squirming. Seeking God is a life-long journey that includes the desire to discover how He wants to redeem your life experiences. Don't give up pursuing truth. The act of seeking in faith is your testimony of hoping in God. It might take years for us to see how God has begun to redeem a tragedy or an injustice. We may never understand all we'd like to know while we're here on earth, but our hope is in knowing one day, in heaven, we will know even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). Persevere. Walk by faith. That's demonstrating the very hope that serving a God of love provides.

Each of the women we study this week confronted a life experience that pushed her to seek God. Within that pursuit, she witnessed His faithfulness. We begin with a woman who often gets confused with the young girl who danced for Herod Antipas, and requested the head of John the Baptist. (Scripture doesn't name this young girl who danced, but Josephus, the historian does.) The woman we'll study lived at the same time and on the same shores of the Sea of Galilee. Her heart reflected something quite different—devotion for the one she followed, Jesus Christ.

#### Day One: Salome—Motherhood and Sons

Read the Biblical accounts of Salome in Matthew 20:20-23; 27:55-56, and Mark 15:40; 16:1-8.

Even though Salome lived in a fishing village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, she probably enjoyed a slightly higher standard of living than the average fisherman's family. Her husband had both sons *and* servants helping with his fishing business. Scripture mentions two sons, James and John, the brothers Jesus nicknamed "sons of thunder". I can imagine these two energetic little guys challenging their parents' patience and requiring them to consistently direct the boys toward the truths of God. Jesus called both of those brothers to be His disciples, and included them in His inner circle.

Salome traveled with Jesus along with her sons. She overstepped her bounds though, when she asked Jesus to promise that her sons could sit on His right and His left when He came into His kingdom. What a bold thing to ask, especially asking Jesus to "promise". I love Jesus' gentle response to such a gutsy request, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?" (Matthew 20:22)

#1. Once Salome met Jesus, she lived her life as a sold-out woman. She left the comfort of her home (obviously with Zebedee's permission) to travel with Jesus. Surely her presence provided emotional support for her sons who also followed Christ as disciples. Her over-zealous motherly actions shock us back into the reality of her humanity. Have you demonstrated these same controlling actions toward someone you love, or has someone shown similar extreme behaviors toward you? If so, jot down a few details of the occasion.

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#2. Jesus responds to Salome’s request with what we could call a tender rebuke. He even goes on to use this opportunity to teach on true greatness to his disciples: *...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:27-28). Salome would eventually come to understand all these things, but for now she must have been confused by Jesus’ response to her request. Name a time you felt confused by how Jesus answered your request. Have you been able, with time, to come to a new level of spiritual insight concerning how things worked out?

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#3. Salome stayed with Jesus all the way through the agonizing crucifixion. She experienced the honor and surprise of having Mary, the mother of Jesus, entrusted to the care of her son John (John 19:26-27). Scripture records that John immediately assumed the responsibility of providing and caring for Mary. We don’t know that she ever required the type of care-giving we think of today when we hear the word. But it does remind us of the emotional and physical energy caring for the elderly can require. Difficult decisions can create discord among family members. Have you watched or been directly involved in care-giving responsibilities? If so, record how these responsibilities affected you or your loved ones.

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#4. Salome, still on her journey of faithful devotion, visits the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1) and sees the resurrected Christ (Matt 28:8). What an amazing moment when she encountered Christ and heard Him say, “Good morning!” (Matt 28:8) Even today Jesus often reveals Himself to us at our lowest moments. In two to three brief statements, identify how God communicated His love to you during a difficult time.

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#5. When King Herod Agrippa beheaded Salome's son James, he becomes the first martyred disciple. James fulfilled the commitment he made in Matthew 20:22, when he said he was able to drink the cup that Jesus was about to drink. Salome paid a great personal price when she and her sons chose to follow Jesus--the disruption of her family, the death of one son, and the exile of the other. We don't know her questions or her grief. We don't know if she saw how God used James' death to strengthen the church. She certainly never knew we'd be discussing her faith and James' death today. Do you know any personal family stories of what it cost your parents or grandparents to follow Christ? What has following Christ cost you?

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### **Day Two: A Shunamite's Story—The Influence of Hospitality**

We read of a woman who, like the Samaritan woman, is identified not by name but by her village, Shunem, located beside the grain fields of the Jezreel Valley at the base of Mt Carmel. She opened her spacious home to the prophet Elisha. Read about her hospitality and his demonstration of appreciation in II Kings 4:8-37; 8:1-6.

#1. We see the Shunamite woman's sensitivity toward God when she offers hospitality to a traveling prophet, even constructing a personal room for him as he came and went through their area. Her generosity facilitated God's work. Has God ever met your need through the graciousness of a godly woman? Has there been a time when the Lord prompted you to be the one who offered grace to another? Write a few sentences describing the experience.

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#2. We would have never known that this woman was barren if Elisha hadn't asked his servant for suggestions for ways to express his appreciation. We don't see any indication that infertility had hardened her heart or caused her to become bitter. Perhaps she'd previously worked through that loss and accepted the quietness of her childless home. Maybe she simply rested in God's sovereignty. We do read of her reaction to Elisha's prophecy of her bearing a child. She pleaded, "Do not deceive your servant." In other words, *Don't play*

games. *This is very serious to me!* Still today, barrenness continues to cause heartache in many women's lives. Do you or a family member have a personal experience with infertility? Write a few words describing the situation.

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#3. Some commentaries think her son might have had a heat stroke. Regardless of the condition, can't you imagine the shock of this mother holding her son while he slowly fades into death? I'm confident she filled every moment with prayer to the prophet's God. As she hurries to find Elisha, she tells her husband, "Everything is all right" (v23). She even offers the same reply to Elisha's servant. Her statements either mean she believes everything is *going to be* all right, or she doesn't want to take time to talk about it. But upon seeing Elisha, she falls at his feet revealing her extreme anguish. The death of a child is a numbing loss. We have difficulty initially interpreting the Shunamite's emotions. The way someone grieves the death of a child or any other loved one can vary greatly. Have you lost a child to abortion, miscarriage, accidents, or disease? Has someone you loved lost a child to death? If so, record a few of the details. Prayerfully consider if you'll want to develop this story further on day five.

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#4. The scene of the boy sneezing seven times as the breath of life fills his lungs brings a smile to our face, especially after reading about Elisha's nervous pacing. The story ends abruptly with Elisha telling this mother to "pick up her son," and "She picked up her son and left." End of story. Not so fast, we skipped over a very important action. Before this bereaved mother picked up her son, she stopped to fall once more at Elisha's feet and to bow to the ground. What a grateful heart! What mother would have been able to delay one more moment from feeling the warmth of her child in her arms! Yet, this mother did. She took time to express as much joy as she had felt anguish at the feet of the prophet of God. Amazing. How do you express your deep appreciation to God? Name an incident where you took time to say a very special thank you to God.

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#5. That's all we know of this gracious and grateful woman. That's the story God chose to record for us in His word. We know there were many more adventures of parenting ahead. Since her husband was elderly, she probably spent many years as a single mother, making those difficult decisions about raising a teenager by herself. We can know for certain that she told her son about his miraculous resurrection from the dead through the faithful servant of God. What story do you need to tell your child about God's sovereignty in bringing them into your family?

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### **Day Three: Huldah—Speaking Truth**

Huldah stands among a small group of elites—female prophets in the Old Testament. They include Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah's wife, and Noadiah. Read the interaction between the prophetess Huldah and the priest sent by Israel's "good King Josiah" in 2 Kings 22:11-20. We'll then take a closer look at the details of her circumstances.

Isn't this an interesting story? This brief scene speaks volumes. Huldah lived with her husband in the administrative area of Jerusalem (stated in the Mishneh) near the Temple. Residents knew of her godliness and devotion to studying God's Word. Jewish tradition states she was a teacher. When King Josiah heard the words of the book of law found in the Temple during renovations, he tore his robes in anguish. He realized Israel was guilty of not keeping the commandments he's just heard read. He sent his priest with four others to inquire of the Lord (v 12). That's quite a weighty distinction for Huldah, yet she handled her calling with integrity and confidence.

#1. Huldah remained faithful to God at a time when the remnant of Israel and Judah had abandoned the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While others worshipped and burned incense to Baal and other pagan gods, she remained steadfast to the one true God. Does this cultural dichotomy remind you of a time in the past (or currently) when you struggled with cultural peer pressure? Describe the situation in a few sentences.

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#2. King Josiah had confidence in Huldah's interpretation of God's Word. She had obviously studied and sought to understand it just like the scribes and priests in the Temple area. The difference was that God had called her to a special

area of responsibility in Israel—speaking forth the truth of His Word. Huldah spoke it precisely. Has your life been influenced by a truth speaker? If so, briefly describe the circumstances?

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#3. Huldah served from a position of leadership and influence. After all, she was married to a court official, the keeper of the wardrobe—either the priest’s wardrobe or the king’s. God placed her in a position of responsibility, and she acted faithfully. Does her situation remind you of a time when you felt the weight of responsibility? Did you respond to these opportunities with, “Here I am, Lord”, or did you run from them?

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#4. Huldah brought a message of judgment yet didn’t hesitate to speak it. Has there been a time you felt God prompting you to speak out on a particular issue? Did you follow through in obedience or did you come up with reasons to remain silent?

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#5. Huldah also brought a message of God’s grace for King Josiah. God said, *Because of the King’s repentant and humble heart, now I will gather you to your fathers and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring upon this place and those who live here* (2 Kings 22:20).

King Josiah died at age thirty-eight in battle. Not exactly what we’d call God’s gift of grace is it? King Josiah died, though, doing what kings did—ruling and leading God’s people. Even though we’re tempted, we must not critique God’s righteousness and goodness. Name a time you felt confused by God’s actions in your life or in the life of someone close to you. Perhaps you’ve also thought of an occasion when you were a recipient of God’s grace even though it didn’t look like it at the time.

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## Day Four: Susanna—Serving and Supporting

We read about Susanna along with the names of two other women in Luke 8: 1-3. Take time to thoughtfully read these three verses.

In writing about the crucifixion, Luke refers back to this threesome. He first mentions that all the people who had gathered to witness the sight left. *But all those who knew him including the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things* (Luke 23:49). From this point on Luke refers to these three women as the women who had followed him from Galilee (Luke 23:49, 55-56; 24:1, 5, 8-10). If you want to discover Susanna and what she was like, you need to read- between-the-lines.

Since women were identified by their husband's or father's names, and Susanna wasn't, we can assume Susanna most likely had neither. She's probably either a single woman or a widow. We do know for sure that Jesus had healed her from evil spirits or a disease. Since Mary Magdalene, named with Susanna, *was* healed from demon possession, I think Susanna might have been healed from physical illness. As a result, she followed Jesus and supported him out of her personal resources—something out of the ordinary. Women seldom had access to family finances. They did have a dowry, but it remained with their husbands unless he should die. Perhaps Susanna had received her dowry after her husband's death.

So here we have a loosely sketched profile of a formerly broken woman who now followed Jesus with great devotion. Let's think through more of her story and look for dynamics that might prompt stories from your own journey.

#1. I find it interesting that Luke mentions these three women together two separate times. They obviously shared common life experiences and drew strength from one another's friendship and support. Think through friendships in your life and see if you'd consider any of them as "heart friends" like these three. Describe the relationship briefly.

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#2. Women typically married around age fourteen to sixteen. The average man lived to around age forty. If Susanna had children, they would now have homes of their own. She's following her heart during a new season of life. Identify a *new* experience you've had during your current season of life.

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#3. Even though women seldom had independent sources of income, they knew how to stretch every shekel as far as possible. They could create both meager meatless meals when resources were sparse and sumptuous feasts at harvest times. Describe a time when you faced meager resources.

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#4. Susanna stood with other women at Calvary the day Christ died. It's impossible for us to know the depth of her anguish as she watched Him suffer. She'd poured all her hopes into this amazing Teacher, and now He was leaving. Describe briefly a time of deep grief as you released someone you loved and faced the unknown future.

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#5. I believe Susanna was among the women who saw the resurrected Christ. Most likely she even prayed with the other women and disciples after the ascension when Jesus sent His Holy Spirit. How do you envision the rest of her life? Describe how you imagine the rest of *your* life.

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**Day Five: My Story**

Over the course of four days you've examined the life of a woman who raised two strong-willed sons, one of whom was the first disciple to be martyred, and a woman who saw a young son die in her arms. Another woman accepted God's calling to a life of

speaking truth in spiritual leadership; while another woman released from a life of evil spirits or disease, discovered her joy in Jesus Christ. I hope their stories have encouraged you in your own journey as much as they've encouraged me.

Review the personal stories that came to your mind this week and prayerfully select one to spend time developing. Can you find Jesus within your story? Can you see evidences of His grace? Do you see how He has used the situation to develop strength of character? Has the experience developed a passion and purpose in your life? Perhaps you're still seeking Him within your circumstances. Let the Shunamite woman's fervent seeking of Elisha when her son died be your own desperate seeking of God within your story. Remind yourself of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:7-8, *Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.* Others will be blessed by your sharing, both in your small group and one-on-one in the days and years to come as you make yourself ready to share-the-hope-within-you!

## Week Four

### Stories of Grace

A word search on “grace” reveals that it’s a New Testament word. The Old Testament uses *mercy* rather than *grace*. How wonderful that we get to live our lives during an era of God’s grace! Some of my favorite verses about grace are found in John and Corinthians: *From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another* (John 1:16); *And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work* (2 Corinthians 9:8); and *He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

This week we look for God’s gift of grace (or mercy) in the lives of four women. In looking for evidences of God’s grace, we will become more sensitive to the grace God provides in our own lives.

#### Day One: Hannah—Motherhood Issues

You might not consider Hannah an obscure woman in the Bible. Even though you may be familiar with her story, I think we should examine additional aspects of her life. After you read her story in 1 Samuel chapter 1 and 1 Samuel chapter 2:1-11, we’ll look at some of the overlooked dynamics of her life.

Barrenness for women in Biblical days felt like a curse. Their husbands needed a male child to carry on the family lineage. Notice our story actually begins in verse 1 with her husband’s family lineage through his great grandfather. In addition, a wife’s ability to bare him children directly affected her status with her husband. Infertility issues today also carry burdens. Most women have a maternal instinct woven into the fabric of their design. Navigating through the emotional complexities of their faith and God’s sovereignty in this area creates a very private journey of questioning and grieving. Perhaps you have traveled that journey yourself, or you’ve watched from the sidelines as someone you loved faced the heartbreak of infertility. Even if infertility prompts no personal stories of your own, I’m confident you’ll uncover other dynamics in Hannah’s life that will.

#1. Hannah was one of Elkanah’s two wives. We immediately see the defining statement in verse 2, “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.” Even Elkanah’s compassion for her barrenness didn’t protect her from his other wife’s provocations and the despair that resulted. We can see her husband’s inability to emotionally share her burden when he said, “Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” Well—let’s see here. What did Elkanah not understand? Name a time when your husband (or father if you’re single) failed to understand your situation because of different gender perspectives.

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#2. Hannah prayed out of the “bitterness of soul”. We find five other references in scripture to praying out of the bitterness of soul. It shouldn’t surprise you to discover Job also prayed out of such deep pain. In fact, Hannah’s silent, but intense praying caused Eli, the priest to accuse her of being drunk. Now that’s just adding insult to injury! (People prayed out loud at that time rather than silently, like Hannah.) We get a glimpse into her heart when we hear her gentle response to Eli, “I was pouring out my soul to the LORD.” Name a time of passionate prayer when you poured out your soul to the Lord.

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#3. What a joy to read that God answered Hannah’s prayer. In fact, God blessed her with three more sons and two daughters (v 2:21). There’s one small phrase I want to focus on though, in verse 1:20, “in the course of time”. Actually, all time is God’s time, so we could rewrite the phrase to read, “in the course of God’s time”. Waiting—it’s difficult for everyone. Describe a time of waiting in your life.

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#4. Hannah made a vow to the Lord during her prayer of anguish. She fulfills it when she brings her weaned son to serve alongside Eli at the house of the Lord in Shiloh. (Note: The Israelites worshiped in Shiloh until King David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.) This was a woman of amazing integrity. She acknowledges this fulfillment with an amazing praise that’s recorded for us in 1 Samuel 2. I’ve copied it below from *The Message*. As you read through it, reflect upon a time you rejoiced greatly in the Lord.

*Hannah prayed: I'm bursting with GOD-news! I'm walking on air.  
I'm laughing at my rivals. I'm dancing my salvation. Nothing and no one is  
holy like GOD,  
no rock mountain like our God.  
Don't dare talk pretentiously—  
not a word of boasting, ever!  
For GOD knows what's going on.  
He takes the measure of everything that happens.  
The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces,  
while the weak are infused with fresh strength.  
The well-fed are out begging in the streets for crusts,  
while the hungry are getting second helpings.  
The barren woman has a houseful of children,  
while the mother of many is bereft.*

*GOD brings death and GOD brings life,  
brings down to the grave and raises up.  
GOD brings poverty and GOD brings wealth;  
he lowers, he also lifts up.  
He puts poor people on their feet again;  
he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,  
Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—  
a place in the sun!  
For the very structures of earth are GOD's;  
he has laid out his operations on a firm foundation.  
He protectively cares for his faithful friends, step by step,  
but leaves the wicked to stumble in the dark.  
No one makes it in this life by sheer muscle!  
GOD's enemies will be blasted out of the sky,  
crashed in a heap and burned.  
GOD will set things right all over the earth,  
he'll give strength to his king,  
he'll set his anointed on top of the world.*

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#5. Hannah tells Eli, “I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.” It’s common practice in many churches today for parents to participate in a “Parent Dedication Ceremony” at their church. Parents commit to raise their children in a godly Christian home and to teach them the truths of God and His Word. How many parents do you know who are willing to take yet another step of commitment and like Hanna say, “I give this child to the LORD. For their whole life they will be given over to the LORD”? Identify a time of releasing your children to the Lord. If you don’t have children, replace “your children” with “your parent,” “your husband,” or someone else you care deeply about. If you’ve found releasing those you love difficult, write down some reasons why.

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## **Day Two: Rhoda—God Answers Prayer**

This week we’re looking for God’s grace in our stories. God demonstrates His grace in such a wide variety of ways that we often overlook it. A girl named Rhoda is one person caught off guard. Her reaction has provided humor for many sermons.. We can

learn a lot about Rhoda even though her role in this dramatic event was quite small. Read about this little girl in Acts 12.

#1. Rhoda was a young servant girl in Jerusalem. We don't know if she worked for wages or what being a "servant" entailed. We do know that Luke, the author of Acts, knew her name. That says a lot about her distinction among those who had gathered in the home for prayer. Peter, arrested by Herod, faced public sentencing, and believers had earnestly interceded for him. Rhoda probably assisted in meeting their personal needs. Have you ever felt like this little girl at family gatherings, busy but ignored?

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#2. Rhoda worked at a unique home, the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Many believe it was in this same home with the large upper room that the disciples gathered after the crucifixion of Christ. It was there, possibly, that Christ appeared to them. To have such a large room indicates financial means. I'm certain Rhoda was awed by the gracious people gathered in this special home. Do you remember the first time you realized that others had bigger, nicer homes than you? Perhaps the situation was reversed, and you first realized that not everyone had the same resources as you. Briefly describe that first awareness.

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#3. The angel leading Peter out of the jail, through the city's metal gate and down the street adds drama to the story. Peter knocked at the outer entrance (possibly a courtyard gate), and Rhoda recognized his voice. Can't you just hear Peter whispering, "It's Peter. Open the door and let me in!" Either her excitement or her caution influenced her to run to tell those praying instead of opening the door. Luke's recording of the incident dramatizes the surprise we feel when God answers prayer. Those in prayer and Peter had received grace in abundance, and Rhoda got to be in on it. When was a time that you were *overjoyed by God's grace*?

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#4. While Peter waited outside, those in prayer discussed who could be at the front door. They decided that if Peter really was at the front door, then "It must be his angel." Attempting to explain God's grace in our earthly realm is a human trait. Is there a time you felt *this is just too wonderful to be true*? Describe it in a few sentences.

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#5. I'm tempted to skip over this one detail of the story because it's so hard for us to think about. Since Luke recorded it, it's important to examine. King Herod had the men guarding Peter executed. What do you do with this type of information? It's so unfair. These were the guys Peter slept between. Surely Peter had shared the Gospel while the guards outside the cell listened. Neither Peter nor the guards knew this would be the only opportunity they'd have to respond. Likewise, we never know when someone hears the hope we share in Christ *for the last time*. This realization creates a sense of urgency. For all of us, hearing the Gospel even one time is a gift of grace. Identify an experience that impacted you when someone did or did not respond to the Gospel when they had the opportunity.

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### **Day Three: Miriam—Accepting Responsibility**

Even though you might have heard the story of baby Moses in a basket in the Nile, you might not remember much about his older sister Miriam. Most scholars assume Miriam was about seven years old when given this enormous responsibility. Fortunately for Israel and for us as believers, the story has a wonderful rather than tragic outcome—Pharaoh's daughter finds infant Moses, and Miriam seeks a Hebrew woman (Moses' mother) to nurse him.

The drama of Miriam's story extends way beyond that earliest event with her baby brother into the journey of the Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. Read several passages that relate to Miriam's roles and responsibilities: Exodus 2:1-10; Exodus 15:1-21; and Numbers 12:1-15.

#1. Miriam acted like a responsible older sister. Even today parents expect the older children to assist with the younger as tasks multiply with each additional baby. Reflect upon an older sibling/younger sibling story in your own family or extended family that portrays family roles. Name an example of these types of relationships/responsibilities in your development.

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#2. Exodus 14:23-31 describes the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Take time to read it.

Verse 31 states, *And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in Him and in Moses His servant.* That's just human nature—requiring bigger and bigger demonstrations of God's power to renew our faith in Him. Hadn't they just witnessed the plagues that caused Pharaoh to release them? Why can't we have that same level of confidence from the daily blessings of food, clothing, and shelter? Fortunately, He understands our frailties and works with them. Describe a time your own faith was encouraged through a mighty act of God or by a small one.

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#3. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds sparks a song in Miriam's heart. She actually holds the distinction of being the first woman singer mentioned in the Bible. Does the Lord put music in your heart and mind as a way to praise him? Was music part of your family as a child? Write a brief description of when the Lord used a song of praise to express the joy of your heart.

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#4. Miriam failed to step out of her role of older sister when she criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite (Ethiopian). Most scholars feel this was a second wife, because the first wife came from the land of Midian. Regardless, Miriam felt judgmental about his decision; and, unfortunately, spoke publicly about it. This undermined Moses' authority as their leader, and God was not pleased. You read about God's harsh judgment in Numbers 12:10-15, and Aaron's repentance for both of them, "Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed." Moses did intercede to God for her and her punishment was limited to seven days. Ah, family dynamics. We all have them! Share any story that comes to mind of God acting in the life of a family member.

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#5. We read an interesting reference to Miriam in the book of the law, Deuteronomy 24:8-9, "Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt." At first it seems it's a foreboding warning not to slander, but closer reading indicates it's actually referring to how to treat someone with a skin infection—put them into isolation for seven days. This amazing woman who shares in leadership with her two brothers died with a black mark on her reputation. What personal story comes to mind about legacies?

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#### **Day Four: A Woman from Bahurim's Story**

If you enjoy a good adventure story, then you'll enjoy reading the background information on the dramatic scene we peek into today. It's found in II Samuel 15-17. If you prefer just the facts rather than piecing them together for yourself, here they are: Remember Tamar in week two? Well, the brother who avenged her death, Absalom, is now back in Jerusalem with a scheme for taking over his father's throne. Absalom leaves under the pretense of going to worship God and gathers an army instead to usurp his father's throne. King David flees Jerusalem weeping as he walks barefoot away, up the side of the Mount of Olives. He sends two of his priests back to Jerusalem to serve as spies. He also sends a good friend back to act as an undercover "wise counselor" to Absalom—confusing any in-house advice Absalom might receive. The two sons of the priest, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, are to serve as messengers between Jerusalem and King David's camp. That's the background in a nutshell.

Read the role this unnamed woman from the town of Bahurim has in saving King David's life in II Samuel 17:17-22.

#1. These two young men, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, waited outside Jerusalem for a servant girl to bring them news of Absalom's plan of action. They were spotted by a young man so they took off running. They come to a home in Bahurim where they are very quickly hidden. This was an emergency. Describe an emergency you've experienced.

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#2. Cisterns were usually individual family "dry wells" dug into the limestone. Families used them to store water collected during the rainy season. Each one probably had a flat limestone lid that prevented evaporation. When this woman tossed a cloth across it then dumped grain on the top, it appeared to be just some grain drying in the sun. Scripture says she's the one who spread the cloth and poured out the grain—a woman of action! Name a time you not only took quick action but also had to come up with the plan of action.

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#3. Absalom's men arrived at the house asking, "Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?" This woman was still thinking on her feet because she replied, "They crossed over the brook." She told a lie to protect God's appointed king, King David. That reminds me of families hiding Jews during the Holocaust and the lies they must have told to protect them. Civil disobedience, choosing to consider God's laws as higher than man's laws, is a complex discussion. When did you, or someone you know face such a challenge?

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#4. After Absalom's men left, the two informants climbed out of the cistern. The woman most likely gave them the all clear signal and removed the grain, cloth, and lid. The guys headed out to deliver their message to King David, and the woman probably needed a cup of wine to calm her nerves! Have you ever stood up to an authority figure because of your personal convictions? How did you feel afterwards?

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#5. Verse eighteen describes the home and the well as belonging to a man in Bahurim. We might guess that he was at work and the woman was home tending to domestic responsibilities. Imagine the scene when he arrived home that evening. Jot down descriptions of when you had a huge adventure to share when your husband or a good friend returned home.

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### **Day Five: My Story**

This week we focused on looking for God's grace in our stories. We studied how God answered Hannah's prayer and provided Rhoda a unique view of His power. Miriam saw amazing displays of God's grace toward the Children of Israel and toward herself after publicly criticizing God's chosen leader, Moses. God used a woman in the village of Bahurim to extend grace to King David during a critical time.

Each of these women lived their lives in response to their circumstances and in response to their understanding of God. They each understood God's grace in unique ways. Review your own experiences noted during the week and prayerfully select one to develop. Look specifically for God's presence within it and how that would communicate the hope you have in Him.

## Week Five

### Stories of Redemption and Glory

*... we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).*

Paul prays a powerful prayer for the believers in Thessalonica—that the Lord Jesus would be glorified in them and they in Him. That’s what God wants to do with everything in our lives. Seeing God redeem and glorify Himself within the events of our life requires spiritual insight that comes only from Him!

We begin with a very unusual request made of an unnamed woman from the village of Tekoah.

#### **Day One: Woman from Tekoah—Wisdom and Bravery**

Today we examine a ripple effect of Tamar’s rape, the story we studied in week two. It involves a dramatic presentation of an unnamed woman in the presence of King David. Read about it in 2 Samuel 14:1-33. We’ll then dissect this drama to see what we might learn about our own stories.

#1. Joab served as King David’s Commander in Chief. He cared deeply about King David’s grief over the banishment of his son Absalom who had killed his half brother Amnon. Joab devised a scheme to get the king’s attention. The scheme involved an unnamed woman from a village about ten miles south of Jerusalem. Scripture calls her “wise,” but she needed to be a lot more to pull off this conversation before the king. This dramatic presentation holds a lot of convoluted intrigue—just like many families today. Perhaps Joab remembered how the prophet Nathan confronted King David with a story concerning his relationship with Bathsheba and decided that strategy just might work again. Regardless, this woman agreed to participate. What personal family stories does this drama remind you of?

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#2. After getting David’s commitment to deal rightly with her make-believe son, this wise woman engaged the King with the *real* issue. She said, “Let your servant speak a word to my lord the king.... does (the king) not convict himself, for the king has not brought back his (own) banished son?”

King David had made provision for the on-going lineage for this widowed woman and her “banished” son; but by banishing Absalom, he had not made

provision for his own lineage. This woman was treading on emotionally sensitive ground. Describe a time you had to speak truth when your heart was “pounding”.

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#3. Grieving takes time. Three years had passed since Amnon had died, and Joab knew “the king's heart longed for Absalom.” David's grieving and protected heart had begun to heal and he longed to see Absalom. We don't know what kept him from calling Absalom back home—perhaps social pressure, pride, or guilt. Through the influence of this woman's conversation, David took a step out of his grief. He summoned Absalom back to Jerusalem. Record any personal experiences you've had with taking steps out of a period of grieving.

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#4. Remember from week two that Tamar lived out her life in Absalom's home? Verse 27 tells us Absalom had three sons and one daughter he named Tamar. It appears he honored his sister through naming his daughter after her. Are you named after a relative? Have you named any of your children after a beloved relative? If so, briefly describe the situation.

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#5. This story also entails forgiveness which sometimes comes through an even more difficult struggle than grieving. Absalom lives in Jerusalem two years before David is willing to see him face to face. That's now a total of five years. What journey of forgiveness have you taken? What role has God's grace played in it?

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**Day Two: Five Daughters—Speaking Up**

Have you noticed how many of our stories come from the Old Testament? That's probably because the Old Testament covers such a large period of time compared to the New Testament. Today's story includes five sisters on the same mission—speaking to Moses about an inheritance issue. As you locate the chapter and verse in the book of Numbers, you'll notice lots of genealogies. By the time you get to chapter 27, the Israelites have gathered on the plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. The Lord instructed Moses is instructed to take a census of all the men twenty years and older. This census would be used to divide the land each tribe received in the Promised Land. Because these five sisters had no brothers, they had a legitimate question about their own inheritance. Read about their request in Numbers 27:1-11.

#1. These five sisters approached the entrance to the Tent of Meeting bringing their case to some very powerful men: Moses, the priest, the leaders, and the whole assembly. They found courage they probably didn't know they had. Perhaps the eldest sister led the way, or maybe it was one of the others. Has there been a time you and your siblings had to band together to make some courageous decisions for your future as a family? Explain.

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#2. When these sisters say their father, Zelophehad, had “died in the desert...for his own sin”, they were referring to God's judgement on those who grumbled against God after hearing the spies' report about “giants in the land of Canaan”. God said those who grumbled would die in the desert. Only their descendants would be allowed to enter the land. (You can read that sad scenario in Numbers 13 and 14.) These five sisters were the descendants about to enter the land promised by God—but without their father or husbands, and possibly without an inheritance. I'm certain they felt extremely vulnerable. Identify a time you felt vulnerable.

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#3. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah came with a plan. They presented it in a logical way that included a very good question, “Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son?” Keeping the family name going was of utmost importance to the Israelites, and these girls were willing to voice the question many other daughters had only thought about. What gender related question simmers in your heart that you'd like to voice? What incident fueled this issue?

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#4. They both asked the question and presented a possible solution, "Give us property among our father's relatives." Moses brought the question before the Lord and received a confirmation from God that I just love! God said, "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relatives and turn their father's inheritance over to them." Moses sought God. How wonderful it is when godly leaders are open to seeking God's wisdom for new solutions to old problems. What wonderful open door/solution has God provided to you recently?

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#5. In addition to solving the sisters' problem, the Israelites ended up with additional laws that provided guidelines for inheritance issues. The girls not only resolved their dilemma but that of future families as well. Imagine their joyful faces as they left the Tent of Meeting. They arrived facing an unknown future and departed with God's provision. When did you also have that type of joyful relief?

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### **Day Three: Apphia—Growing in Christ**

Christ always works to conform us into His image, often in ways we least expect. Apphia, believed to be the wife of Philemon, is mentioned in Paul's salutation in the letter written to Philemon. We have the letter in its entirety, all twenty-three verses. It's so small you'll have trouble locating it. You'll find it after the three "T" books: Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus. Note who Paul addressed the letter to in Philemon 1-3.

#1. Once again we meet a woman who opens her home for the gathering of local believers. For Paul to address her by name indicates a special distinction. Paul writes such a tender salutation saying, *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints...Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because*

*you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints* (Philemon 4,5,7). What a surprise to us today to realize that the occasion of this letter is a request for grace to be extended to his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul was sending him back as a brother-in-Christ. Apphia and her husband both face an opportunity to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. When have you felt God urging you forward in growing in grace?

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#2. If Apphia is not Philemon's wife, then she's a woman who made a mark on the church in her own right. So many New Testament women are unnamed. For instance, we don't know the name of Peter's wife's name, nor any of the disciples' wives! Isn't that unusual? Paul requests, "Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers" (Philemon 22). Who do you think did the preparing, Philemon or Apphia? When did you have the opportunity to minister to someone by hosting them in your home? How were you blessed by the experience?

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#3. We don't know why Onesimus ran away. Was he badly treated or did he just long for his freedom? Some believe he had stolen from Philemon because Paul offered to personally pay back anything he might owe. We do know that Christ had changed him dramatically because Paul calls Onesimus, "my very heart". Don't we all long for this type of personal transformation? Describe how God has transformed your heart in one or multiple areas.

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#4. Apphia's husband had the legal right to punish Onesimus with death. Now Paul was asking that Onesimus be welcomed back just as they would welcome back Paul. Imagine the conversations Apphia and Philemon might have had over the dinner table. We don't know the details, but how I hope that Apphia strongly supported her husband in doing the right thing. Recall a time your opinion influenced the outcome of a situation.

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#5. Notice how Paul uses the word perhaps' in verse 15. *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother* (Philemon 15-16). Paul doesn't seem like a perhaps kind of guy, but we have to acknowledge that some things in the Christian life are not black and white. There truly are a lot of "perhaps" moments when it comes to looking for God at work. For fun, think of a "perhaps" situation in your own spiritual journey.

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**Day Four: Ahinoam-Married to a Difficult Man**

"Married to a difficult man" is not a new theme. Scripture describes King Saul, Israel's first king, as a handsome young man. A good-looking king would certainly have had his pick of brides. Therefore, we can assume Ahinoam, his wife, had qualities that caught his attention. 1 Samuel 14:49-50 describes this family. *Saul's sons were Jonathan, Ishvi and Malki-Shua. The name of his older daughter was Merab, and that of the younger was Michal. His wife's name was Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz.* . You can read about Saul, his insecurities, victories, emotional tirades, and tragic death between 1 Samuel chapter 10 and chapter 29.

#1. You're probably familiar with many of the stories of young David the shepherd boy, Goliath the giant, and King Saul scattered throughout the book of 1 Samuel. Most likely, you haven't thought much about Saul's wife and what her life would have been like with such a turbulent man. Whom do you know that was married to a difficult man? Are you aware of God's intervention of grace in that relationship?

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#2. Ahinoam surely pleased Saul by giving him three sons, Jonathan being the oldest and successor to the throne. Jonathan and his youngest brother were

killed in battle. Their father falls on his own sword to escape capture and humiliation by the enemy. Many women have lost sons in war, but losing two sons and a husband at the same time is a triple loss. Share how war has touched your life in this generation or in previous generations.

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#3. Ahinoam also provided King Saul with two daughters. Saul gave one of them, Michal, to David in marriage. The King later took Michal from David and gave her to another man. (After becoming king, David took Michal back.) Mothers experience pain when their children suffer. What broken marriage story has touched your life?

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#4. King Saul most likely had another wife. We read the name of another son killed along with Ahinoam's sons at the final battle (1 Chronicles 8:33; 10:2). If he did, we don't have her name. Even though multiple wives were not that uncommon, the dynamics must have added to Ahinoam's complicated relationship. Jealousy is a cruel emotion that eats away at our hearts. When has jealousy sabotaged you?

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#5. Ahinoam's son, Jonathan, demonstrates many noble qualities. One admirable trait was his devoted friendship with David—even though God had chosen David as Saul's successor rather than himself. David memorialized their friendship upon his death with the words, *I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother. You were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women* (2 Samuel 1:26). Jonathan seemed to reflect character qualities absent in his father. Perhaps they came from his mother! We do have, though,

Saul's statement in 1 Sam 20:30 calling Jonathan "the son of a rebellious woman!" (I'm not so sure I'm willing to take Saul's interpretation of character qualities at face value.) Identify a special quality you feel you inherited from one of your parents. Share a story that illustrates it.

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**Day Five: My Story**

We looked this week for God's acts of redemption in the lives of four women. God used a wise woman from the village of Tekoah to confront David with an area of his own household that he'd neglected, an area that needed redeeming. The five daughters of Zelophehad boldly asked for their lives to be redeemed by receiving their father's rightful proportions of land. Paul asked Apphia and her husband to redeem the life of their slave who had become their brother in Christ. Lastly, Ahinoam's relationship with a troubled husband was redeemed in some ways by the noble qualities of her son, Jonathan. Now it's your turn. Look back through the stories that came to mind this week and choose one that demonstrates an aspect of God's redemption. Pray God will reveal to you any new areas of His redeeming grace that you might have missed before.

## Week Six

### Becoming a Life-Long Story Teller

*All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from following the Messiah, but no more so than the good times of his healing comfort - we get a full measure of that, too (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) .The Message*

Without knowing it, anytime we encourage someone going through an experience similar to one we've had, we're fulfilling exactly what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, comforting others with the comfort we received from God. The more stories we collect with insight into how God has been present in them, the more opportunities God will have to use us to comfort and encourage others. Continuing the process of collecting and sharing our stories means we're becoming life-long story tellers!

We begin this week with a story about a woman that will probably surprise you, Paul's sister! You'll see how Paul's nephew moves to action after hearing his uncle tell his story. Ah, the power of story.

#### **Day One: Paul's Sister—The Influence of Siblings**

Today we're back in the New Testament on more familiar ground with Paul in Jerusalem. As usual, Paul shared his own hope in Christ (Acts 24:15) and then suffered the consequences of angry crowds. You can read the whole story from beginning to end in Acts 21:27-Acts 23, or you can read the abbreviated story in Acts 23:11-35. This is the only place in scripture we have references to Paul's immediate relatives—specifically his sister.

#1. Growing up as Paul's sister would probably be similar to growing up with Jesus as your older brother, each with its own different set of challenges. She seems to be in Jerusalem at this time and, like Paul, would have Roman citizenship. Acts 23: 17, 18, and 19 all refer to her son as a youth. The way the Roman Commander responded by taking him by the hand and drawing him aside seems to confirm that. So, if the son was around 10, then Paul's sister would have been around 26-30 years old. Having a son carry such important information is an enormous task for someone so young. Did your extended family face serious/complex circumstances when you were a young woman? Did you carry big responsibilities for someone your age? If so, what were they?

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#2. To have "Uncle Paul" creating such chaos in Jerusalem because of sharing his testimony probably provided great intrigue for Paul's nephew. Verse

16 states, “When the son of Paul’s sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.” We don’t know how this young man heard about the plot. Perhaps he heard it first hand by just hanging around the Temple courts. Maybe an adult told him to make sure Paul learned of this planned ambush. Regardless, he acted fast. Verse 16 indicates he “went into the barracks”. Either he had proof of being related to Paul or they already knew who he was. He acted immediately in Paul’s best interest. We don’t know if he checked with his mother first or made an independent decision. Sometimes we have to make quick decisions. Recall a time you had to act quickly. What were the circumstances? What was the outcome?

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#3. The time Paul’s sister spent with him in Jerusalem was probably the last time she saw him. He was transported to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast for safety from the Jews’ plot. From there he appealed to Caesar and was taken to Rome. We seldom know when we’ll see a family member for the last time. Do you have any family relationships with a lack of closure due to someone’s unexpected death or some other circumstance? What was the situation?

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#4. According to Acts 22:2-3, Paul went to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, an honored teacher of the law. Paul’s sister lived in the same home honoring Jewish law. We don’t know if she became a follower of Jesus through Paul’s influence. She’s never mentioned by name nor greeted in any of Paul’s epistles. We can hope she became a believer after Paul’s death after hearing his letters read in the church in Jerusalem. I have more confidence that her son became a follower because of his direct involvement with Uncle Paul. Do you have siblings you long to know Christ as their Savior? Are you looking for ways to share the hope you have in your heart because of Christ? Describe that relationship.

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#5. Paul instructed Timothy in 2 Timothy 5:1-2, how to relate to the church members in Ephesus: *Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.* Paul probably drew upon his own family relationships as he wrote this. I'm confident his relationship with his sister influenced the admonition about how to treat younger women. Identify a situation when your former family relationships influenced those you have within the Body of Christ?

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### **Day Two: A Little Maid's Story**

Remember the prophet Elisha from week three? He healed the son of the wealthy woman from Shunem. We called her the Shunamite. This next encounter with Elisha results from a young Jewish girl taken captive. Read about her wisdom and forthrightness in II Kings 5:1-19a. This young girl had been taken to Aram, the area we now call Syria that extended as far as the Mesopotamia River. She was a long way from home and in service to the wife of the commander of the army. Let's think about her circumstances and see what prompted her to tell the story of her God.

#1. Words like great, highly-regarded, victorious, and valiant soldier describe this little slave girl's owner. He also had leprosy, which concerned this little girl. Her words to her mistress communicate compassion: "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." This "if only" must have sparked hope in a desperate situation. The very next sentence has her master, Namaan, before the king asking permission to go seek this help. One little comment from a compassionate young slave girl set in motion events that glorified God. Has one of your children been used of God because of their faith? Can you recall a time God used you in your youth?

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#2. Have you ever played the game "Gossip"? We see the game's principle in this story. The little girl said "see the prophet in Samaria", but the King wrote a letter to the "King of Israel" requesting that he cure Namaan of his leprosy. Communicating cross culturally especially sets the stage for lots of miscommunication. Maybe the wife misinterpreted what was actually said to Namaan. Perhaps what she said and what Namaan heard were two different things! Regardless, no one double-checked the facts before acting. We experience

mistakes from haste, miscommunications, or human error. Jot down an instance you made a big decision based upon faulty information.

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#3. I'm surprised how quickly Elisha the prophet heard about the King's angst after Namaan arrived asking to be healed! This was during the time of the divided Kingdoms of Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Elisha served as prophet to the northern Kingdom before modern communication. No cell phones or texting! Once Elisha did hear about it, I love the message he sent to the King, "...Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel" (II King 5:8b). God is able to work through all our human communication limitations to accomplish His will. Describe a time miscommunication created chaos, but God worked in spite of it.

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#4. How often do we have in our mind the way God should do something? Naaman's attendants were the ones who pointed out his illogical response to such a simple instruction. When was the last time you expected God to act one way and then He surprised you with a different plan?

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\$5. Don't you love Naaman's response in verse 15 when he said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel." This little girl spoke of the power of the prophets of Israel's God even as a youth, and God was glorified. Name a time you as a young person or as a young believer spoke of your God and influenced someone's life.

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### Day Three: Puah and Shiphrah—Doing the Right Thing

God called Abraham to be the father of a great nation. Much of this time of becoming a nation occurred in Egypt. They flourished under the Pharaoh's blessing. After this first leader died and a new one took his place, they continued to flourish—but under the Pharaoh's harsh oppression rather than his blessings. God used two unlikely women to accomplish His will, Puah and Shiphrah. Read the story in Exodus 1:1-22.

#1. This second, paranoid Pharaoh attempted oppression of the descendants of Abraham. He put “slave masters” over them to subjugate them with forced labor, yet they continued to multiply. God's will was accomplished against all odds. God multiplied progeny and created a nation through which He could send the Messiah. Think of a time God accomplished His will in your life in spite of others attempting to sabotage it.

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#2. The Pharaoh's exact words to the midwives were, “When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live” (v15).\*\* Imagine the aversion those midwives felt upon hearing those instructions. You rejoice at the words that follow in verse 17, “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.” God blessed their act of honoring God over the Pharaoh. Write down a time you were willing to stand for what you believed regardless of the consequences.

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#3. The fact that we know Puah and Shiphrah's names is just amazing! All we really need to know is that they were midwives. They obviously earned a place of distinction in the heart of each Hebrew woman who delivered a baby boy

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\*\* Archeologists have actually found an ancient Hebrew birthing stool. Hebrew women sat on a wooden chair with supportive arms and a recessed opening in front. At that time they sat astride two flat stones or bricks.

and each proud Hebrew father who had prayed for a son. These women were God's instruments in accomplishing His will. Who has God used in your life to make a way for you when all doors seemed closed? Briefly describe the situation.

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#4. The King summoned Puah and Shiphrah to stand before him. Imagine how their hearts must have pounded on the way to the palace. The King asked a very direct question: "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" These two women had a response prepared. They'd obviously spent time deciding how to account for the consistently high birthrate among the Hebrew women. Once before we saw a falsehood used to accomplish God's will. It's hard to reconcile—especially as parents teaching children to always speak truth. God obviously knew their allegiance was to Him and counted that a blessing to them. The King's judgment was spared and Puah and Shiphrah left with no consequences. They experienced God's grace through a pagan source. Identify a time you received God's grace from an unlikely source.

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#5. We see God's additional blessings when we read, "So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And *because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own*" (v. 20-21). (italics mine) Doesn't that make you smile? A double blessing! I bet they took turns delivering each other's babies! Their stories have lived on after them. For years these amazing stories were oral collections before being gathered and recorded. What story of double grace would you like to share?

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#### **Day Four: Damaris—Seeking Truth**

The Apostle Paul made three separate evangelistic journeys. You can read about each one in the book of Acts. During his second journey he spent time in a cluster of Greek cities, then had to flee from Jewish rabble-rousers. He sailed to Athens where he

encountered men eager to engage in philosophical discussions—in fact many spent most of their time talking about and listening to the latest ideas, Paul’s included. Read about Paul’s time in Athens in Acts 17:16-34.

#1. Paul came to Athens after teaching in Thessalonica and Berea. In each city, we read of prominent women becoming believers. Only one was named. We can assume Damaris wasn’t married since married women remained secluded at home. They were also identified by their husbands’ name or simply left unnamed. Damaris possibly enjoyed the privilege of membership in the Hetairai, a group of educated, unmarried women who could actively take part in philosophical discussions. She must have held a unique distinction in the fledgling group of new believers in Athens since Luke, the author of the book of Acts, knew her name! Has there been a time that your unique platform allowed you an opportunity to be known as a follower of Christ? Describe the situation.

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#2. An interesting phrase follows Damaris’ name in Acts 17:34, “and a number of others.” This phrase portrays the customary way of referring to women—nameless and faceless. Does this situation of feeling invisible while in the presence of another woman who is distinctly visible feel familiar? Name a time you experienced that.

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#3. The word Aeropagus has a double meaning. It’s the word for the venerable council that had charge of religious and educational matters in Athens, *and* it’s the hill on which they met. Paul had reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue and in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there (v17). Those who heard him brought him to the Aeropagus so they too could hear his new ideas. Damaris most probably heard Paul at the gathering of the Aeropagus. We don’t know if she believed the first time she heard the good news or if she had additional opportunities to hear it. Verse 32 indicates the council wanted to hear Paul again, but verse 33 said Paul left. How many times do you think you heard the Gospel clearly presented before you believed? Describe the time you responded in faith.

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#4. This message Paul presented to the Greek council stands out as one of the most famous in Scripture. Re-read verses 22-34 while envisioning Damaris and the other women in the audience. Which of Paul's "persuasions" moves you? Why? What do you think moved Damaris?

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#5. Paul said in verses 26 and 27, ...*He determined the times set for them (men) and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.* God determines the time and places we live. Have you always wished to live in a different time or place? Share a story that illustrates where you are in embracing this part of God's design of your life.

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### **Day Five: My Story**

This week we saw how Paul's sister influenced his life through her son, and how one little servant girl's initiative brought glory to God. We also saw the boldness of two midwives and the impact of their courage. In the exclusive neighborhood of Athens we found Damaris, a woman whose fertile heart responded to the truth Paul proclaimed. Review the personal experiences brought to mind by these Biblical stories and then prayerfully select one to develop further. Remember, this week we focused on intentionally starting the journey of becoming a life-long story teller of God's grace and of the hope that is in your heart. Perhaps using that guideline will help you in selecting your story.

### **Conclusion**

I recently read the following in an e-letter from the North American Mission Board. *In Mali, it is said that when an old man dies, the library burns. In a land where history and tradition are passed down orally, stories are important. Journeymen Susan and Amy spent two years in a remote African village working with OneStory developing 20 to 50 stories that tell the Gospel of Jesus Christ from creation to return. Each Scripture-based story relates to the people in their cultural setting so they can hear it,*

*learn it, and tell it. Although life in the village is a challenge with bucket baths, disease, and even mice falling off the ceiling into their beds at night, the two young women believe it's worth every challenge to be able to tell the story of Jesus to people who are hearing it for the first time.*<sup>††</sup>

We forget that many cultures still depend on oral communication as their primary means of transferring information. That makes stories even more valuable. They transcend cultures and age groups. I remember being on a mission trip to Cuba. Team members visited homes of local church members. Each church member lived in a home housing up to eighteen or twenty people. When a guest arrived the people mysteriously appeared to listen and meet the visitor. I discovered my very simple childhood testimony of being afraid of death and the emptiness I felt at night when I turned off the light crossed cultural barriers very well.

Just as I got to the love of Christ that filled my heart, an impressive man stood up and through a translator said, “But I am a Communist.” He then sat down. I shot an unspoken “help” to the Lord then immediately saw a way to create a common ground. I said, “But you and I have much in common. The story I shared of how Jesus put His love in my heart has brought me to your country to tell your friends and family about it. You also have love in your heart for your people and believe providing equally for all people is one way to show it.” Those words God provided seemed to calm him for he nodded and never interrupted again. Our stories create both platforms for sharing the truth of Christ’s love and common ground for building relationships which can lead to sharing the Gospel.

Our testimony of salvation extends into each event in our lives where we’ve taken time to find God at work. The way God wants and will use your hard work is endless. I’m confident that the stories you heard during the study from your journey-mates have enriched your life, strengthened your faith, and encouraged you. Aren’t you glad each woman took the time to think them through, write them down, then share them with you?

My prayer is that each of us will draw upon all that the Holy Spirit has for us as believers. As we face circumstances that appear hopeless, we can go to the Source of hope and ask Him to create within our hearts that which only He can do—and then empower us to be willing to share with others what He’s done! *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit* (Romans 15:13).

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<sup>††</sup> This article came from [kingdomwomen@imb.org](mailto:kingdomwomen@imb.org) on May 08, 2009. Sign up to receive additional news about what God is doing around the world through women by going to [KingdomWomen@your.imbresources.org](mailto:KingdomWomen@your.imbresources.org).

## APPENDIX

### Sample Stories

#### **Week One: The Influence of Story**

##### Brief Description—Granny’s Diagnosis

The family had just received news of Granny’s diagnosis of metastasized vaginal cancer. We drove Granny back to her home in Palestine after her short stay at my parents’ house. Once we arrived, my mother, aunt, two sisters, and Granny pulled up lawn chairs in a circle in the yard. We sat outside making small talk while the kids played inside Granny’s house.

##### Same Story with Added Emotions

I experienced a wave of sadness when I learned about Granny’s diagnosis and a wave of anger that she hadn’t been told to continue with her annual check ups after her hysterectomy. Having family members present provided familiar comfort until we pulled our lawn chairs together and began to just make small talk. I felt I should take my social cues from my mother and aunt, but I really wanted to scream out, “Why don’t we talk about something that matters? Like what we all need to be doing for Granny. Can’t we talk about how upsetting this is? And, why are you just sitting there, Granny? Can’t you see we need to talk about this?”

I felt like I was living the children’s book about a baby dinosaur in the living room that only a child could see. The longer the family ignored it, the larger it grew. Was I the only one upset? To make things worse, our young girls came out of the house with some of Granny’s hats asking if they could have them! I don’t know why they would have gone into her closet, but it felt like they were already dividing up her personal items. Embarrassed, I told them to put the hats back up.

What I really wanted to do was sit by Granny and hold her hand. I wanted to lay my head on her shoulder and say how sad I was that she was sick. Instead I did what they did...rocked and chit chatted.

I realize now that was the beginning of observing how Granny and her adult children would face her illness and eventual death—indirectly and emotionally detached. I felt awkward and confused by her adult children’s behaviors during the next eight months. I still grieve today that I never said what I wanted to say or express my love and sadness directly to her.

I chose to learn from this experience and became determined to discover healthy ways to face these life issues in the future with my own parents. And we did!

I’ve also studied and learned from how Paul viewed his earthly body.  
*2 Cor 5:1 ...if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven....meanwhile, we groan and are burdened ....We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.*

Linda Lesniewski

#### **Week Two: Our Earliest Stories**

### Simple Description: Daddy's Chair

My father had a recliner that only he sat in. My father came home in the evenings, ate supper, then got into his recliner in front of the TV. I remember asking one time if I could sit with him in the recliner. When he said “yes”, I climbed in and lay very still with my arms straight beside me.

### Same Event with Emotions & Spiritual Nugget Added

My father had a recliner that only he sat in. His presence was both comforting and detached—since he often was asleep. He came home in the evenings, ate supper, and got into his recliner in front of the TV. It's where we could find him whenever he was home. It's where he signed our report cards and gave out a dollar bill for an “A”.

I was probably 5 or 6 years old when I got up enough courage to ask him if I could sit with him in the recliner. When he said “yes,” I climbed in and lay with my arms straight beside me. I remember barely breathing, not moving an inch. I didn't want to disturb him because he might tell me to get down. I can remember the feeling of being close—squished, actually—and I remember wondering if he enjoyed it as much as I did. I would have loved for him to have put his arm around me and hugged me or carried on a conversation about anything. It really didn't matter at all. We watched TV together. I don't recall what we watched. It just felt so good to be so close to him. I don't remember ever asking to sit with him again. I sensed he didn't enjoy it as much as I did.

He bought a new recliner in his ranch home when I began my family. I carefully placed each child in his lap when we visited. He'd talk and interact with them a little—then I'd pick them back up. I don't remember him ever hugging them or inviting them to sit with him in his chair and watch TV.

His own father was killed when he was two years old and his two older sisters did most of his “raising” because his mother was busy running a boarding house. He probably got very little if any “hugging” or “snuggling” of his own.

Today I have two granddaughters with another on the way. I just can't get enough snuggle time with them. I even purchased an over-sized recliner so they'd have plenty of room to sit with me or Gary and read books, talk, and watch TV together.

God has been faithful to fill my own cup with an abundance of hugs given freely from my church family. In many ways those hugs came directly from Jesus to me just as in Mark 10 when it says, *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.*

### Week Three: Finding God in Our Stories

### Simple Description: Childhood Summers

My oldest sister and I had 2 girl cousins we shared summer vacations with. Each summer, we took turns spending time at each other's home, Kountz, or Corpus Christi, Texas. I remember swimming in a spring-fed pool in Kountz and playing in the surf and sand dunes on Padre Island near Corpus Christi. I also remember the arts and crafts we got to do as well as shopping the tourist shops along the boardwalk on the bay. Our parents either took turns driving one of the directions, or they arranged to meet half way.

### Childhood Summers--Developed

My oldest sister and I were fortunate to have two girl cousins near each of our ages, Becky and Luann. Each summer we got to spend a week visiting them. Claudia visited Luann in Corpus Christi and I'd visit Becky in Kountz where we tossed watermelon rinds over the back fence to the cow in the pasture. I also liked to walk down to the corral on the edge of a dense forest. It's where they put lost horses and cows until someone claimed them. I loved the suspense of never knowing what we'd find there.

Often, all four of us would visit together in Corpus. We made such special memories there! We went crabbing off the breakers on the bay and ran up and down the sand dunes on Padre Island. We'd bring so much sand home from seashore, my uncle rigged an outdoor garden hose shower so that we could remove our sandy swimsuits and hose off before we entered the house. The water felt freezing on our sun-and-wind-burned bodies.

The days were full of fun, but as the sun went down each evening, I remember the feelings that came with it. I especially dreaded the incredibly quiet house in Kountz. I was used to a noise-filled house. The quiet seemed eerie, and I felt alone.

I remember the embarrassment I felt in Corpus one particular summer. All four of us were together laughing when the evening feelings of homesickness began to set in. I remember feeling so vulnerable and embarrassed. I wanted so much to be like the others, yet the ache in the pit of my stomach was too intense to allow me to be able to laugh and play like them. That summer my oldest cousin tried to talk to me and encourage me, as well as did my aunt. I remember feeling that they must really love me, but no one ever seemed to find the magical words to make it go away. I seldom ate much supper and only the magic of sleep made it disappear.

Homesickness crippled my childhood and prevented me from a lot of summer camp experiences. I'm so glad that I eventually grew out of it, whatever that means. I actually believe, though, that I began to find my comfort and security in my relationship with Christ. He became the constant companion with me wherever I went and continues to be with me today no matter how far I travel from home. I've found His promise to be true, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

#### **Week Four: Stories of Grace**

##### **Embracing God's Word**

**(A devotional taken from [www.encouraging.com](http://www.encouraging.com))**

*You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.* Psalm 119:4

Missy, a friend of ours, was severely burned in a tragic accident. She was hospitalized for a long time. We all know how painful burns are, and her burns were severe.

One day when I visited Missy at the hospital, I was deep in thought about how I could encourage her. What could I say? How could I help her? When I walked into Missy's hospital room, she was propped up on pillows with an opened Bible in her hands. She was absorbed in God's Word. She looked up and greeted me with a big smile and bright eyes.

I asked, "Missy, how do you endure all the pain you have?" Her reply was, "When this tragedy happened, I prayed for God to give me something or some way to deal with this pain. God has answered that prayer in a big way. He has given me a

hunger for His Word. I bury myself in the Bible. His Words are comforting, and I find myself so lost in His messages that I'm able to endure the pain. I know He's taking care of me."

As I was driving back home, I realized that I wanted to be like Missy. I wanted to hunger more for God's Word, so that became my prayer. God answered that prayer in a big way. I really have a zeal for Bible study. This cancels worry, helps me make decisions, gives me great peace, and strengthens my relationship with God.

Reading God's Word is a first step towards spiritual health. It is also a great privilege. Some places in the world do not enjoy the freedom we have to read the Bible and study it together with fellow Christians. In most of the world, in fact, there's a famine for the Word of God. The Bible is God's book that He Himself wrote. Think of how it is being ignored and attacked by people today.

Why not pray today for a hunger for God's Word.

***Georgia Andrus***

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**Email:**

To my special friends and relatives,

Precious Carole passed away this afternoon about 1:15. It was a holy time. I had the time to talk to her, read Scriptures, and we listened to our Christian radio station. Just moments before she died, the music was *I Can Only Imagine* and just as she died they were playing *Come to Jesus*. She opened her eyes wide just seconds before; I believe she could see the angels coming for her. What a special blessing for me.

This all has happened so suddenly; we first knew something was going on Saturday, March 29th. From there, rapid progression: ERs, hospitals, then hospice care in the facility where she lived. I could not have asked for more loving attention than she had. What happened inside her head, only she and God know. It is and will remain a mystery, but God has hugged me with a bubble of His mercy and grace, so I can face tomorrow.

As for arrangements, nothing planned yet. Will be graveside, but arrangements pending at this point.

You have been so faithful to pray and to offer your help. Please know that David and I are both grateful as we reflect on our memories and rejoice that we are confident that she was met with open and loving arms.

Blessings to each of you as you give thanks for her life.

Lynda

**Week Five: Stories of Redemption**

## Story of Redemption

The local VFW sat on a narrow oil top-road near a trailer park on the outskirts of town. It was one of two of Daddy's favorite places for drinking. The other was our ranch while he worked cattle.

I can't remember the occasion or the reason why I went to the VFW, but I did go there once to find Daddy. I remember angrily swinging open the front door and noticing the dimly-lit pool tables to the right, table and chairs to the left, and a counter with a lady standing behind it straight ahead. With hands on hips, I asked, "Is Marcus here?" "He was here earlier but no longer," she answered. I turned and left feeling angry at "that place" and jealous of the relationship Dad seemed to have with "those guys". For years I never passed by that oil-top road that I didn't feel angry. I viewed the VFW as a wound refusing to heal, providing seclusion for those refusing to face life without the numbing effects of alcohol.

Twenty-five years passed, and so did Daddy. Through an amazing set of circumstances, I had the opportunity to visit the prisoner of war camp where Daddy spent 15 months during WWII, Stalag Luft I, in Barth, Germany, on the Baltic Sea. Months later I met and befriended 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Claude McCrocklin, one of Dad's roommates from the camp. Claude lived only 50 miles away in Shreveport. Claude called Dad "Tex" and had great admiration for his character, humor, and leadership among the guys. Claude continued to suffer serious emotional effects of the war, but because I'd visited the site and wanted to talk about their experiences, he began to talk, and talk, and talk...and he began to feel better. Claude not only made Dad's POW experience real to me, he also helped me understand the amazing bonding that occurred between those who served and survived together. They shared an unspoken understanding that felt comforting to one another. Their relationship needed no words.

Because Dad never received his WWII medals and had refused to let us apply for him, Claude arranged for us to receive Dad's military medals posthumously in a very formal POW dinner at Barksdale Air Force Base. What an amazing evening. Having those medals pinned on us by a 5 Star General made us so proud of what our father had sacrificed during the war, and brought us all to a new place of understanding the effects of the war on him.

Several weeks later I received an invitation to my aunt's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday party—Dad's older sister. As I headed out the door, I grabbed the pictures from the POW dinner. I knew she'd be so pleased to see them. As I drove into town and past the oil-top road to the VFW, an amazing thing happened—I thought of Dad's friends there who might also want to see the pictures! This time when I turned into the dirt parking lot, instead of anger, I came bearing gifts. I swung open the front door and asked, "Is anyone here a friend of Marcus Kolb?" The lady-behind-the-counter pointed to her right and said, "That gentleman over there was a good friend of Marcus."

He sat by himself with a bottle of beer. A single hanging bulb provided just enough light for us to look through my stack of pictures. The memories of the time we shared with one another still touches me. He had served in the Korean War and spent 32 months in the Korean Hilton, a POW camp famous for its brutality and for the number of POWs who died there. He proudly escorted me to the wall where an aerial picture of the camp hung in a dime store frame. He'd brought it to the lady-behind-the-bar and "She framed it and hung it here," he said proudly. "That winter the lake froze over, and every day we'd drag the bodies across the lake and then bury them over here on the other side. The ground was so hard it took us a long time to dig the holes."

We must have visited for an hour. I discovered he and Dad had shared several business ventures. He missed Dad. When I invited him to church, he said, “Now don’t go preaching to me. My wife and I went regularly to a Baptist church. I know all about that.” He asked for my address, saying he had some things he’d like to send me; and he did—a picture of both him and Dad at a meeting and a copy of a small book. It told about the legendary chaplain who volunteered to stay and minister at the Korean Hilton—until his own death. He had known this chaplain and was pleased to share the story with me.

I realized that God had accomplished an amazing work in my heart. He’d brought me from anger and resentment to understanding and forgiveness. But he didn’t stop there....God brought me to a place beyond. A place I didn’t even know existed—compassion. Today when I drive past the oil-top road, I pray for those guys at the VFW; and I ask God to bring them, like He did me, to discover a whole new level of grace and healing in their lives.

### **Week Six: Becoming a Life-Long Story Teller**

#### Just in Time—in China

Gloria and I prepared food and water for a journey a short while ago. It was a long trip and along the way we passed out tracts and witnessed to people about Jesus Christ. Many of the people we met were just walking along when we walked up to them and told them Jesus loved them. Many responded with something like “Jesus loves me? I’m just a farmer.” We told them “Yes, Jesus, Shang Di loves you!” We stopped to have lunch in one village and met an old lady 82 years old selling bananas. We bought some bananas from her and began telling her of Jesus’ love. At first, she didn’t seem to understand what we were saying. As one of us witnessed to her the other prayed, and then she understood clearly what we were saying about the Gospel.

She began to tell us that her village worshipped demons and the spirits in nature that live in the trees, water, and mountains. Every year her village would sacrifice pigs to these demons for protection against them. Every household in the village was required to provide a pig for the sacrifice. After spending a while witnessing to her, we asked her if she would like to give her life to Jesus Christ and she responded, “Yes, I would.” We led her in a prayer of commitment to Christ, and when we finished she was so happy. She told us that she would never again offer any pork for the village sacrifice. “It is a waste and I can go to heaven,” she said with a smile. When we returned home we were tired and felt weak from the journey, but we were overjoyed because of the woman’s salvation. To us it seemed like the trip was really for her. We believe that God in His love for that woman sent us out to specifically reach her with the good news of Jesus Christ. We don’t know how much time she has left, but it is possible we reached her just in time.

Bill Dillemoth and Gloria  
May 2010

**Arise. See! Come.##**

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##Taken from [www.encouraging.com](http://www.encouraging.com) devotional website

*“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”*  
Song of Songs 2:10-13

I admit it. I forgot the beauty of Spring. Living in Florida the past few years, I was accustomed to flowers throughout the year in bloom. Color surrounded me daily along with an abundance of sunshine. When I moved to Texas, it rained fourteen days straight our first two weeks here. Then the trees let go of their leaves leaving the branches bare. The ground froze, and one morning I woke up to that frozen ground covered in a white blanket of snow. The seasons and I have met once more.

I cried most of the winter. It was a cold winter here in East Texas, and I was lonely and cold inside. Change is never easy and I’ve never been one to navigate change gracefully. I missed family and friends and sunshine. About the time I was feeling weary of the winter in my life and the winter season, a yellow bloom caught my eye and the verses above caught my heart.

*“Arise.”* Time to get up. Change takes place whether we want it to or not. We can be a part of it, or we can shut ourselves up in a dungeon and refuse to participate. But with the Spring this year came the beckoning voice of God, *Arise*.

*“See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come.”* No storm lasts forever. Winter never stops Spring from arriving. See! What a fitting word to direct my gaze to the newness of our life here and now. No more tears. It is time to embrace and experience the beauty around us, and beautiful it is. My yard has been an explosion of color with greens and purples, pinks and reds, yellows and whites. The birds are music singing the newness of the season into our lives. *The winter is past.*

*“Come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”* Beckoned. Called forth. And the One calling? My Creator gently moving me through the transition, *come with me.*

Tammie Lawless

### I Can See Clearly Now\*\*\*

*But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.* 2 Corinthians 3:16

I’ll never forget how I felt when, at 13 years old, I put on my first pair of glasses. I was amazed at what I saw! Or, more specifically, I was amazed at what I had been missing.

I remember distinctly how clear that leaves on the trees looked to me. And street signs. And billboards. I think I nearly drove my mother crazy that day; I spent hours looking over the tops of my rims and then back through the lenses, all the while exclaiming at the clarity with which I could now see.

I will also never forget how I felt when, at 25 years old, I finally opened the Bible and understood what I was reading. As I began to devour every word, I was excited

by the promises I found there, but dumbfounded that they had been right there in front of me all my life and I hadn't seen them.

Like getting glasses for the first time, beginning a relationship with Christ allowed me to finally see clearly; just like He promised, He removed the veil from my eyes when I trusted Him as my Savior. Finally, when I picked up my Bible, those words came alive; not only did they make sense to me, but they seemed like they were written just for me (Heb. 4:12).

With each day that has passed since then, I have seen God's faithfulness. He keeps the promises that He makes, and I am living proof that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

My prayer for you today is that God's Word would grab you by the heart and that, by His living and active Word, God would tenderly draw you to Himself. Sister, if you have never accepted His offer of salvation, I pray that you would trust Him so that you, too, could walk in the freedom and abundance for which you were designed.

I will spend the rest of my time here looking at things through my "old" eyes and then marvelling at how much God has changed me through Christ, only to exclaim at the grace, beauty, and perfection of His plan!

*Thank you, Father, for giving me eyes to see You, ears to hear You, and a heart to be Your home. Glorify Yourself through Your servant and continue to transform me into Your likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). I am in awe of Your transforming power and so grateful for the freedom You give.*

***Jennifer Jennings***

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\*\*\*Taken from [www.encouraging.com](http://www.encouraging.com) devotional website