

How to Read Stories of Grace, Part 1  
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Turn with me to the book of Judges. As you turn there you're going back almost thirteen hundred (1,300) years before Christ. The nation of Israel exists as a loose confederation of tribes at this time, led by kind of tribal leaders. And every once in a while they'd gather around and rally around one leader and deal with a situation. But they're pretty much a loose confederation of tribes. And it's the second generation of Israel, so these are people that...these are individuals that didn't go through the great story of Exodus. They weren't there when God thundered from Mount Sinai. They weren't there when there was a crossing of the Red Sea or the Jordan River. This was a group in Israel, a nation, a generation that didn't know all those grand and glorious miracles. It's the second generation in the land. We'll pick up the story in verse 12 [chapter 3].

*Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees (...the city of Jericho, or right near there).*

*The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.*

*But when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, of Benjamin, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him (by Ehud) to Eglon the king of Moab. Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length (about eighteen inches), and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.*

*It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But he himself (Ehud) turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. And Ehud came to him while he was sitting along in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he (Eglon) rose up from his seat. Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out.*

*Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them. And when he had gone out, his servants (Eglon's servants) came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.*

*Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. It came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them. And He said to them, "Pursue them, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." So they went down after him and they seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and they did not allow anyone to cross. They struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.*

The Bible's not always what we expect. We pick it up and we hope to find a manual, a how-to manual of how to live the spiritual life; or maybe a systematic text of all things theological, arranged alphabetically; or maybe an inspirational book of powerful sayings that will get us enthused and ready to tackle the day; maybe some poetry; maybe some good religious essays. But when we open it we find Ehud and other stories like his. And we find as we go through this book instead of a nice concise rule book on how to handle life, and a manual on how to do things spiritual, and a textbook on what God is like, we find story after story after story...strange stories...and they're all kind of woven together in some way that makes one grand story of God's redeeming grace. Stories.

Now, there's other things. There's commentary on the stories. There's letters written during these events. There's poetry written from within those stories. There's wisdom looking back at those stories. There's prophecies of stories yet to come. But it's mostly stories. That makes a challenge when you pick up your Bible, because you read and respond to stories differently than you read and respond to a rule book, or a how-to manual, or a theological reference. You read and respond to stories differently.

And one of my goals for us this school year, as we enter into a new one, is that we will read and respond to the Bible as the story it is; that week to week, as we come together, we will respond to it and we will read it the way it was written and meant to be responded to—as a grand and glorious story of God's redeeming grace. By the end of the year my goal is that you will have a good sense of that story from beginning to end, and you will have a good sense how the various stories like Ehud fit into that grand story, and even more you will know how your story fits into that story. That's my goal as we approach this new year of study together.

And we're gonna take a couple weeks to kind of prepare for it before we actually launch the project. And over this week and next week I'm gonna give you some skills, some tools, to use when you approach a story of grace...simple things you can use to help you see the story. Now I'm not doin' this like a literary professor that just wants to give you an appreciation for literature. See, it's my desire that if we can learn to see God's grace in the grand story of scripture, then we will become able to not only see our stories better but we will see the grace in our stories. So this, to me, is vital. It's not a literary exercise. My goal is to teach us to see the stories so we can see the grace.

Gonna give you just a couple tools; we're only gonna give you one today, one tool to use, one thing to do as you approach a biblical narrative, a biblical story, one thing to start at the very beginning to look for and to track. And it's very simply the plot, the story line, the flow of the events, how the action is put together. Whenever you pick up a story you wanna follow, ok, what leads to what, and where is it going, and how does it end. You wanna follow the plot, the story line. And so the first thing I do when I'm reading an Old Testament story or I'm listening to somebody tell me their story is I try to pick up and follow the plot.

Now the neat thing, one of the interesting things, is when you follow stories of grace in scripture you're gonna find that they tend to follow a similar pattern, a similar story line—that once you begin to see it, almost every story you pick up you can recognize it and have a feel for how the story is progressing. What you'll find is that there's always kind of a background section where you'll be given a setting...a description of where it takes place and when, and some of the characters that are there involved; plus the situation...any of the dynamics there that you need to be aware of if you're gonna make sense out of the story. And so you start usually with a...there's some background information at the beginning of the story.

And then there will be a transition. What'll happen is God's grace will begin to work; in some way, and somehow, in the biblical stories of grace God's good will will begin to move, to work, and it'll create a tension. And what'll happen is there'll begin to be an escalating tension between God's grace and human sin. See, every time God's grace moves it will be resisted by sin at some level, in some form, in some way. And so as you read a story of grace, as the background is done, you'll begin to see the emergence of God's grace and you'll begin to see some tension beginning to build. You'll begin to see an escalating conflict between God's good will towards man, and man's willfulness towards God. What God wants to accomplish for good in our lives begins to conflict with what man wants to do for themselves. And you'll invariably find that in the stories of grace you read in scripture.

And that tension will build and build until you're saying something's gotta give, and it will. And you'll move into what is called the resolution part of the story, the part where the tension is resolved, the conflict is settled, where the story moves to crisis to calm, and you're able to go, "Ahhh." Then you'll be into the conclusion. That's a good word for it, huh? And it'll describe, oftentimes briefly, sometimes in a long part, it'll describe the new situation—how things are changed since God's grace moved. It will go on sometimes and it'll provide a note as to the lessons to be learned from the story. This isn't often, but sometimes you'll be given some notes or some lessons to be learned.

And then lastly, sometimes you'll get what I call footnotes of interest, things that make you just kinda say, "Huh!" Paul Harvey was a master at this. When he would tell his stories over the radio, people's stories, he would tell the whole story, he'd get you caught up in it, you would walk through the background, the tension, the resolution, and then he would hit the conclusion. And invariable in the conclusion he would tell you the name of the character he was talking about. And you'd go, "No way! Not him! Not her!" And he'd close, "Now you know the rest of the story." Ok? Well, that's a footnote at the end of a story that "Whoa!" Well, sometimes you'll find that kind of thing in a biblical story.

Now the transitions between the elements, as you move through them, the transitions are not always well-marked. It isn't like the Bible stops at a certain verse and says, 'ok, now you're moving to transition.' Oftentimes it's really hard to sense; in fact, you may not even be aware that the transition is being made. It's almost like one writer describes it, says it's almost like driving in an automatic car with an automatic transmission, and it shifts between gears and you don't hardly notice it shifted. Other stories are quite the opposite; it's like somebody can't run the clutch right, and 'bwoom, bwoom, bwoom-bwoom!' Ok? Now the first transition from background to tension is usually pretty easy to track 'cause you move from general statements to really specific action steps that are sequenced tightly. When you move to conclusion it's the same thing—you move from specific sequence actions to just kinda general statements.

The thing that really kind of gets our attention, the thing that really stands out, is when the transition is made from tension to resolution; and sometimes that is really dramatic. I'll call it the pivot, the crisis, the climax, the turning point, the defining moment. And a lot of times in stories that's what will really catch your attention, and it's a thing that's kind of interesting to try to track and find. And sometimes what you...it's amazing, you'll discover it's...what's really the turning point is something you almost overlooked.

Every plot will have its own profile, I call it, that you can kinda track according to that tension point, or the resolution point, pivot point; have a beginning, the tension builds, then it's resolved and it winds down, and then you move into the conclusion. Every story will have its plot profile, I call it, and they vary. Every story will have a different one. Seldom do they look like this. A lot of times you'll find that the tension just builds, and builds, and builds, and the resolution is really sharp. Other times you'll find that, boy, the tension is dealt with quickly and it's a long time resolving the pieces that are dealt with. Other times you'll find that it's not much happened. Other times, and more often you'll find it looks like this.

Let me give you an example. Ehud the Deliverer, ok? Starts off with some background in chapter 3, verse 12. It says

*Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD.*

In other words, they were doing something they had done before...they were beginning to worship idols. They were turning their back on the Lord God of Israel. It was a time in their history when they did that. And we're told they were doin' it again. And we go on getting more background where it says

*The Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel...*

The Lord raised up this pagan king and gave him strength; not just strength individually, but numbers. Other countries joined in and made a confederation, a set of allies that came against Israel. And they defeated Israel, and they actually moved into the land of Israel. They took over the city of palm trees...that's probably where Jericho was, or near there. And they actually set up territory in Israel. And they began to have the Israelites pay tribute to them, and it was like this for eighteen years. The Israelites served this king of Moab. They started out by serving pagan gods, and now they were serving a pagan king.

That's the background of the story. The tension begins—the tension between grace and man's willfulness, and man's sin—at verse 15. That's where we start moving into the story. And we're told that

*... when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud.*

God's grace is beginning to move and tension is there immediately, 'cause you know as God answers that there is a very evil person that needs to be dealt with—Eglon the Fat has to be dealt with. We're told that Ehud was assigned to bring the annual tribute, to pay the heavy load of taxes, to this king. It says by his hand he had to pay this king. And finally Ehud's fed up with it and he makes a sword, a special sword that he can hide under his cloak; and you know somethin's gonna happen when he makes that sword. And the tension begins to build, and you're wonderin' what's gonna happen. And then he goes and he pays the tribute, and then he turns away and he walks away with his friends, and you start saying, 'Oh... he's not gonna do it.' But then we're told he reaches the idols that were at Gilgal; a special place for Israel now has pagan idols. He reaches there and he tells the rest of the men, 'Go on,' and he turns around by himself and he goes back to the king. And you're sayin', 'Oh, now somethin's gonna happen!' And the tension builds again. And he gets into the private audience of that king, and everybody's gone, and he shuts the door. And now we hit...now we come to the pivot point, the turning point of the whole story. It's not a pretty one. He pulls out that sword and he kills the king.

From there we're into resolution. The story has turned at this point and from there we're into resolution. We're told that Ehud escapes, he gets outta there, that Israel answers his call to battle, they rally around this brave hero that they have, and they defeat Moab. And they are...they regain their land. And as you come to that and you recognize things are resolved, and you're feeling the sense of peace, it's stated at the very conclusion. And we're told that Moab was subdued under Israel. No longer were they serving Moab; Moab was serving them. In fact, we're told that the land went on in peace for eighty years.

As you come to the end of the story and you're reading the conclusion, you start looking and say 'Ok, what are the lessons to be learned here? What are the lessons to be learned? What am I supposed to do?' They're not there. The writer doesn't give you any lessons to be learned. He doesn't give you any applications to make. He just moves on to the next story. We're a little impatient with that in our culture. In fact, not just a little—we're very impatient with that. See, we like our truth neatly packaged. We want concise explanations and clear directions. And if you can do it, give it to us motivationally. Hear me very carefully at this point. Truth is never lived that way, and it's never learned that way. That is not the way you encounter and experience truth.

One of my favorite pastor/writers, a man by the name of Eugene Peterson, makes a comment near the end of one of his books. He makes a comment; and he's pastored in American churches his entire career, and he makes a comment about it. He says, "You know, we are very uncomfortable with mystery and with messes. We don't like mystery, and we don't like a mess." The next statement he makes is this—"The problem is God is full of mystery, and we, at times, are really a mess." That's truth. That's the reality we live. And I am absolutely convinced that until you see the story you will not see the grace. Until you see the wonder and the mystery of God's heart wrestling and working with the messes of our lives, until you see the story, you will never see the grace. That's why we need to read the Bible the way it was meant to be read.

As we go forward with this year to see the stories and see the grace. And beyond that, so emphatically and so important, is to be able to see the episodes of grace in our lives as we learn to see 'em in scripture. All the varied episodes we go through with the different plot profiles that are unending in their diversity—learn to see those! And not just the individual episodes of our lives, but to be able to see the story of grace that is your life, to be able to see the story that God is working of grace in you. Now I'm sorry—I can't put it into a concise explanation and a neat directional application. All I can call you to do is see the story, see the grace, and learn, as a result, to worship that God who is working in your life. That's our challenge in the year ahead.

Got a prayer that is gonna introduce it, lead us forward in it, so I'm gonna ask you to stand with me. A simple prayer. Following that prayer we're gonna sing our song of witness that is a song we're singing as a congregation every day for three years. Gonna sing it very specifically today in light of the fact that you know what? If we're gonna be witness of God's grace and glory we need to be a people who see the story and see the grace so we can give witness to it. Let's start with prayer.

*Our Father in heaven,*

*Give us eyes to see. Open the eyes of our hearts, Father, so that when we open this book we see the stories and we see the grace, and even more we see the story that they all link to. May we see Your redeeming grace. And Father, I pray beyond it that You will give us that You would open the eyes of our hearts so we see it not only in the pages of this book, but Father, I pray for these people gathered in this room at this moment. And I pray whatever episode in their life they are going through right now, whatever stage of experience they're caught up in, that Father, You would show them Your story that is being worked and they will see the grace. And then, Father, to go beyond their individual experience that this moment, and they would see how all the years of their life are being woven together in an individual, unique, creative, amazing plot profile that is a work of Your grace in a unique way with them. Father, I pray nothing short of that You will show us Your grace, and we will be a people who will worship and witness because of it.*

*In Jesus' name, amen.*

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, and enjoy that peace and grace. Amen.