

How to Read Stories of Grace, Part 2
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We're starting the school year with two sermons, two Sundays that feel a little bit like a "Bible as Literature" class, and has that kind of classroom feel. And we're concentrating on teaching a bit about how to read the Bible. There's a reason for that—I find that most people, when they pick up the Bible, are expecting to find a religious rule book, something that will tell them what's right and what's wrong, when to do things and when not to do them, those sorts of things. Or maybe they're hoping to find a theological reference text that will line out for them all things related to God in alphabetical order. Others are looking for a how-to manual—how do you handle the various relationships you're dealing with, and the problems that are coming at you. And still others are hoping as they open these pages that they're going to find an inspirational collection, something that will lift their spirits when they're down and sustain 'em when they're facing a challenge.

But instead, when we open these pages we find stories like the story of Ehud. Now, there's more than stories. There's poems, and there's letters, and there's prophecies, and there's wisdom sayings. But all of those, in some way or another, connect to all these stories. And there's many of these stories. And somehow, as you read them, you have a sense that somehow they all connect into one grand story. We're a little impatient with that. We're a culture and we're a people that like our truth neatly packaged. We want...we want concise explanations; we want clear directions. And if you'll give us that we're glad to skip the story and just get to the bottom line. But as one of my favorite writers tells it, he says, 'You know, we're a people that want to be able to manage everything, and we're uncomfortable with mystery and messes. But the reality is God is full of mystery, and sometimes we're really messy.' And truth is only lived in stories, and best learned in stories. So the Bible, God's word to us, comes in stories, true stories that do all connect in a wondrous way to a grand and glorious story of God's grace.

That means we have to approach the Bible differently. We have to read it differently than we would a rulebook or differently than we would read a how-to manual or a reference text or a collection of inspirational sayings. We have to read the Bible differently. And that's what these two Sundays are about, last week and this. And kind of the theme I'm using is that when we go to the scriptures we need to see the stories, and we need to see the grace. In fact, we won't see the grace until we see the story. And so the most critical thing we do when we pick up the scriptures is to see the story with a goal of ultimately seeing the grace.

We talked last week about seeing the story, and there's two critical parts to that. The first we talked of last week is to trace the plot, to track what goes on in the story, to look at the sequence of events and get a feel for the action and where it goes...where it starts and where it ends up. And most stories of grace, when you go through the biblical record, you'll find that they're made up of four basic elements. There will be background that gives you information on the setting, the situation, and what led up to the circumstance you're gonna be looking at. Then it moves into a section that is often called tension, and that's where God's grace begins to move in the situation and it meets against resistance. Good comes against evil. God's grace has to deal with man's sin. God's good will for us comes up against our willfulness, good against evil. That tension will build and build to a breaking point, and generally there is a dramatic place in the story—sometimes very loud, very specific; sometimes very quiet, you might miss it—where suddenly the tide turns. There's gonna be resolution. It's called the crisis point, or the turning point. And grace begins to flow, and there's resolution, and all the details in the situation get dealt with. And then finally you come to the conclusion of the story, where you have a new situation outlined and described to you. It's the basic flow of a story of grace.

Ehud's story fits it well. It's easy to see it in that story. Background—the people of Israel had sinned. They'd come under oppression. They cried out for mercy. God raised up Ehud and suddenly we have tension. We have a person that's raised up to bring God's grace and he has to deal with a wicked king. And he does...with a sword. And after the sword is drawn and thrust we move into resolution, and we have the people of Israel rallying around their new leader, and they manage to defeat and throw off the sever yoke of the Moabite army. And we move into the conclusion—eighty years of peace.

That story follows a pretty symmetrical story line. When I deal with stories I like to kind of plot out the plot and trace how the story flows around that pivot point. And Ehud's story is a pretty simple one. It's pretty symmetrical. It's easy to see the background, the tension, the resolution, and then conclusion. It just flows really easy. Not all stories flow that neat. Some of 'em, for example, the tension builds and builds and builds throughout most the

story, and the resolution is quick and fast. Other times the crisis point comes early in the story and it takes a long time to resolve all the issues that were related to it. And other times you'll find—and these are the boring stories—there's hardly anything happens, and you can move on and say, 'Show me a better one.' And there are a lot of better ones, because in the Bible you're gonna find some that aren't easy to track. You're gonna find, more often than not, that they're very convoluted. And there's ups and downs, and twists and turns of that plot, and sometimes you're wonderin' 'Is this the transition?' and then it's not, 'Are we finally resolved?' and then it's not, and the story's like our lives...read a lot more complicated than a simple, symmetrical line. That's the story, and that's the plot line you trace.

But you gotta do more than trace the plot line. You also need to look at the people that are involved in that story if you're gonna get the most out of reading it, if you're ultimately gonna see the grace involved. Now, this is pretty easy for us. We're natural people-watchers. I mean, you go to the airport. You go to the mall. You go to the stadium to watch a baseball game. You go to the state fair, and what do you do? You watch people. Ok? They're fascinating to us. We're intrigued by 'em. So it's pretty easy to watch people. And when you move into the story sometimes as you watch the people you can forget the story line. Don't wanna do that. But you do wanna pay attention to the people.

Generally when you're workin' through a story in the Bible, a grace story, you're gonna find two main characters. One will be a protagonist. This will be the main character of the story, the hero, the guy wearin' the white hat. Ok? You're gonna have one main character. And then you'll also have...in this story you'll have Ehud is the one that we would quite obviously say is the protagonist...then you'll have an antagonist, one that is against him, one who is an adversary, one who is gonna try to stop what the protagonist is trying to do. This is the one most often in a black hat.

And in this story it's pretty easy to see—Eglon. Pretty easy in this story; that's why I like to use it to teach reading stories in the Bible, because it breaks down so simply. You've got Ehud—the hero, the protagonist. You've got Eglon—the enemy, the adversary, the antagonist. You'll find descriptions for them. Ehud is described as a son of Gera, the Benjamite. Literally, if you translate that, it says 'a son of the right hand.' And he's a left-handed man. So what we have in Ehud is a left-handed right-hander. Alright? Ok? The tribe of Benjamin—that was literally what their name meant...the son of the right hand. Ok? But he is a left-handed son of the right hand. That's the description of him. When you come to Eglon you have, as Joel put it, he was not a slender man. Ok? That's the description of these two men.

And here's somethin' that I think is valuable to recognize, important to recognize, about Biblical stories, is you generally won't get much more description than that. The protagonist—a right-handed left-hander, or left-handed right-hander; the antagonist—a very fat man. Compare that to what you'd find if you picked up one of the better writers in American literature, one of the elite among the writers in American history, Louis L'Amour. I'll read a quote that an author has from Louis L'Amour. This is a book on literature, so we know it's gotta be a good quote. This is from the novel "Flint", describing James T. Kettleman.

His face was lean and hard, triangular, with high cheekbones, green eyes and a strong jaw. His sideburns were long in the fashion of the time, his hair dark brown and curly. In the light it showed a tinge of red. His skin was dark; his features, except for his eyes, normally without expression. James T. Kettleman, financier and speculator, had often been called a handsome man. He had never been called a friendly one.

Now that's a description! Cheekbones, eyes, everything else; and what we get—left-handed right-hander and a fat man. There's somethin' important here. The Bible isn't that concerned about how people look. And if you're gonna study the characters and get to know them, the Bible's more concerned that you see what they do and hear what they say, 'cause that's how you get to know them. And so you'll find in the scriptures very little description of appearances. See if you can find a description, a physical description, of Jesus Christ. See if you can find it. Or the Apostle Paul, or Peter, or James, or John. The Bible's concerned about what they say and what they do.

To that, sometimes their names will give you a clue about them. And if we're missin' everything, and we might miss the important thing, the Bible is clear to add a note, a comment; the writer will tell us something of importance related to that person. Let's take Ehud, the hero in this story. We know from his actions that he made a sword. He was a man of action. He took that sword and he thrust it into the evil king, and he was in front of them—that is, he took the front and the lead of the armies of Israel—and led them into battle. We know he's a man of courage; we

know he's a man of action, and we know he's a man of war. He is a leader in a desperate time. We know also that he was very conscious that it was not just him, that God was involved in what he was doing by what he said. When he brought out the sword to deal with the king Eglon, he said 'This is a message from God.' I love that line in the story. It's the pivot point in the whole story. 'This is what God has for you,' is what he says. But then when he rallies the people of Israel around him he says, 'Listen, the Lord has given your enemies into your hands.' He was very conscious of he was on a mission from God, and God was involved in what he was doing. That wasn't just a false dream, grandiose thinking. The writer of the story is very clear to us; the Spirit of God makes sure that we understand that Ehud was a man from God, because we're told early in the story that the Lord raised him up. Those are the most important things to know about Ehud.

When we move to Eglon we know that he defeated and he oppressed Israel. He was a powerful man; he gathered other nations around him, so he must have been a leader of power and influence. And once he had control, he oppressed with a heavy hand. But at the same time, this powerful, wicked king who oppressed for eighteen years was easily assassinated. He was easily, relatively, dealt with. In fact, you almost sit there and say, 'How can he have been so foolish?' And when he died, his army falls apart; which tells us that, again, he must have been a powerful leader. If the army doesn't have him, they don't know how to handle the situation. But then, how could he be so easily assassinated? And here the narrator makes sure we understand something—that he had been strengthened by the Lord. That's how he rose to power. And he was dismissed by the Lord—with the sword of Ehud.

Those are our two main characters and what we learn from them. We look at their words and their deeds, and the notes that the narrator provides. There's also a supporting cast, and you'll always find this in most stories. You'll find some other characters around that, when you look at them, will help us understand the main characters a bit. There'll be contrast, there'll be similarities, there'll be things you'll pick up as you look at the supporting cast. They'll help us understand the flow of the story; they'll help us see the grace even more. In this story we've got the nation of Israel, the Israelites in this story. And they don't come across really well. And then we have the Moabites, and they come across pretty well when you think about it. In fact, you wonder how it is the Israelites managed to defeat the Moabites. When we start out you find that they're a people who, again, did evil before the Lord. They were a people who continually ignored God and went off to worship other gods. And that's how they got into the bind they were in, because God then put them under Eglon, and they served him for eighteen years. And yet, in the end, they subdue Moab, a people they had tried to defeat before and were unsuccessful. So we've got these sinners who had been defeated and held in bondage for eighteen years, suddenly become the strong man on the beach! And there had been another strong man. The Moabites are described at the end of this story as all robust and valiant men...robust and valiant men. In other words, it's like the local losers finally beat the big bully. That's what happens as we go through this story and Ehud leads 'em.

Ok, once you do that, once you look at the people and you trace the plot, you're ready to begin to see the grace of what's goin' on in this story. You begin to...there's an interplay as you read through and you track the events, and you keep lookin' at these characters...you suddenly begin to realize "Wow! Somethin's happening here!" And what you're seein' as you read this story, and you see any other story of grace, is you'll see that God is doing good that is not deserved. And that's what we mean by grace. We serve a great, and wondrous, and glorious God of grace who out of His wonder, and His mercy, and His love extends His grace continually into our lives. And we see that in this story. God does good that is not deserved. A people that had turned their back on Him, had gone to worship other gods...not just once, but repeatedly...and finally when the pain is too great they cry out. We're not told they repent. They just say, 'God, it hurts!' He raises up a deliverer for them. He sends a message to Eglon through Ehud, and He gives the enemy into Israel's hands. That is grace. That is grace.

One thing you see as you read it, and you notice...and you'll see this often when you look at God's grace and when it appears in the various stories in scripture...in fact, I would say this is one of the most dominant characteristics of God's grace, and that is the sovereign power of it. It's God's grace that ultimately determines the outcomes. It's God's grace that ultimately determines the outcomes. He put Israel under Moab. The story is very clear. He's the One who put Israel under Moab. He strengthened King Eglon, gave him the power, and subdued Israel. At the same time, He is the One who put Moab, in the end, under Israel. That is called sovereign power. That means He is the One who controls; and not only does he have the authority to do it—he has the ability to do it.

Now a question when you read that is 'Wow! Can this God who can control petty kings in ancient Palestine—can He control, and can He determine, and can His grace reign sovereign over empires and nations?' We'll have to read other stories to find that out. There's a sovereign power to God's grace whenever it moves in our life.

There's also somethin' else in this story, and you don't see it often and related...or at least it catches us by surprise. I'll put it that way. And that is the hand that delivers the grace, and the hands that receive the grace in this story. Usually when we think of God's grace we usually think of something that is gentle, that we receive passively; something that is kind and gentle from God, that we just open up to and receive. I tell you what—that's not the case in this story. The hand that delivers God's grace in this story is an aggressive sword-bearing hand. And the hands that receive this grace have to actively engage in combat against an enemy that had repeatedly defeated them. It's an aggressive grace, demanding active engagement. I highlight that, because our perceptions of God's grace become so dulled by our culture; and we tend to think of this gentle feeling that sometimes flows into our life and we say, 'That's grace.' Listen, God's grace can be aggressive and demand every ounce of your active engagement. I highlight that because God's grace comes in so many different ways that you'll be astounded by it; and you need to be prepared for however it comes at you.

Having said that, we're done with the biblical literature lesson for the day. And I want to appreciate your willingness to go through these two weeks with me when I talked about reading stories with plot lines and protagonists and antagonists. And I appreciate your willingness to do this with me, ok? But I want you to understand as we wrap up these kinda two weeks of literature training, I want you to understand we're talking about more than reading stories. We're talking about making sense of your life. This is infinitely beyond reading stories. This is about making sense of your life. See, I'm absolutely convinced that your life is a story of grace. Your life is a story of grace. Followin' your own individual pattern and plot line that God is working out—your life is a story of grace with all sorts of different episodes of grace going on. In fact, you may be in the middle of an episode of grace right now. And they all connect in some way to the grand and glorious story of grace that is God's story of human history. That's hard to see. Eighteen years under the severe hand of Eglon did not feel like a prelude to God's grace. A left-handed right-hander moving off to give taxes and tribute to a wicked, fat king did not look like a deliverer of grace. Remember, the sword was hidden. And the call to pick up and fight something that has already defeated you and held you under its thumb for eighteen years, the call to pick up and fight it once again does not sound like God sayin' 'I'm giving you grace.' And listen, eighty years of peace can begin to feel very routine if you forget the story.

The only way I know of for us to be alive and aware to the story of grace that is our lives is to spend time in scriptures, where our eyes and our hearts are trained to see the story and the grace of God. So I'm callin' you to it, 'cause we're moving into a year of looking at story after story after story of grace. And I'm calling you to see the stories, see the grace.

Let's stand.

Our goal, ultimately, is to give witness to the grace of God in our lives, and that's our prayer as a congregation.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

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