

STORIES THAT TELL: The Truth Flowing Through the Bible

Study 5

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THE POWERFUL TRUTH

To my own surprise, I once remarked that it might be best not to try to make converts to Christianity, but simply to tell the story of Jesus and the Father's love, in the Spirit's power. One problem the 'global religious marketplace' has produced, is that people often have a very distorted perception or image of what they understand to be 'Christianity'. It may be the dated image of 'white shirt and tie, hat-wearing, solemn, fun-hating, moralist' or even a view that 'decadent, immoral, greedy, Western society' is Christianity.

The designation of people as 'Christians' began in Antioch, probably as a term of reproach (Acts 11:26). It was not until the second century that believers in Jesus Christ began using the word 'Christian' as a term of self-designation.¹ One must not be ashamed of Christ or his people, and criticism is sure to come. But terms that have lost their essential meaning may seriously need to be transcended by truth, in stories.

Geoff Bingham tells the story of a woman, in an Eastern country, who had a Buddhist background, and while she had 'no cause to think highly of the Christian faith'² became a nominal Christian in order to marry the man she wanted for her husband. Some time later, she was deeply moved by hearing the biblical story of Jesus 'the Good Shepherd' (John 10:11f.). The Spirit imparted to her the mystery of the cross, whereby the sinless Good Shepherd lay down his life for the sheep, for her, willingly being struck by the Father (Matthew 26:31), that the lethal power of the killing, accusing, destroying wolf, might be defeated. She heard the message, saw a true view of Jesus crucified, and tears came 'trickling from her luminous eyes'. He writes:

She was unashamed as she looked at him. Culture had slipped away, and the age-old drama of love-to-man, love-to-God, was being played. 'I saw him as my Shepherd,' she whispered. 'Oh, how I loved him. How he loved me. I wasn't a Buddhist. I wasn't even a Christian. I was me, and he was my Shepherd. Outside the rain was beating down; inside that church the Shepherd met us. He cried from the Cross, and he came down to love me.'³

BIBLICAL STORIES

While many of Geoffrey Bingham's stories are of events in recent years, many others are simply a retelling of some part or parts of the biblical narrative. Some of his most powerfully retold biblical stories include the following:

¹ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, Doubleday, New York, 1969, p. 268

² G. C. Bingham, 'Calling by Name' in *Angel Wings*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1983 (1981), p. 8

³ G. C. Bingham, 'Calling by Name' in *Angel Wings*, p. 11

ANGEL WINGS

- Jonah, (Jonah 1-3), in 'Angry Unto Death'
- Mary, Martha (Luke 10:38-42), in 'These Were Two Sisters'
- Lazarus (John 11:1-45), in 'These Were Two Sisters'
- Mary anointing Jesus; Simon (John 12:1-8; Luke 7:36-50; Mark 14:3-9), in 'These Were Two Sisters'
- Jesus healing the paralytic man (Luke 5:17-26), in 'This Man Was Forgiven'.
- Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-12), in 'From Shame to Serenity'.
- The Blessed Man (Psalm 32), in 'The Universal Conscience'
- The Healing of the Blind Man (John 9), in 'Blind is For Glory'.
- Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:1-18) in 'From Demons to Delight'.
- Simon and The Woman (Luke 5:36f.) in 'Same Story - Different Points of View'
- The Samaritan Woman (John 4), in 'A Fountain is for Flowing'.
- Matthew (Matthew 5-7, 9:1-17, 26:56, Acts 2:1f), in 'New Wine For New Men'.
- The woman crippled for 18 years (Luke 13:11), in 'The Woman who was weak'.

THE CONCENTRATION CAMP

- Simon Peter, John, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Thomas (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), in 'The Easter Happening'
- The story of Christmas, told in the form of a play, with substantial parts for 6 persons – (1) Narrator, (2) Mary of Nazareth, (3) Joseph, Mary's Husband; (4) Shepherds, (5) Simeon, (6) Anna, and a song for a choir – entitled 'The King in our Flesh'.

GOD AND THE GHOSTOWN

- Jesus birth—the story of Christmas, told in the form of a play, with substantial parts for 6 persons – (1) Narrator, (2) Mary of Nazareth, (3) Joseph, Mary's Husband; (4) Shepherds, (5) Simeon, (6) Anna, *and a song* for a choir – entitled 'The King in our Flesh'.

THE VANDAL

- Wrestling Jacob (Genesis 32:24-32), in 'Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love'
- Abraham (Genesis 12f.), in 'Abraham and the Covenant'

THE STRANGER IN THE CEMETERY

- Jephthah and His Noble Daughter (Judges 11-12), in 'Jephthah and His Noble Daughter'
- Job (Job 1-42), in 'Whom Shall We Blame?'
- Koheleth (Ecclesiastes 1-12), in 'Koheleth and the Congregation' (an essay)

THE LION ON THE ROAD

- A prophet from Judah, and the old prophet from Bethel (1Kings 13), in 'The Lion on the Road'.

THE RAYMOND CONNECTION

- The Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26f. Matthew 12:3-4; 1Samuel 21:6), in 'The Holy Feast'

TRUTH IN ACTION THROUGH THE STORY

Geoff Bingham reveals his understanding of interplay between story and truth:

We all love a good story. Some of us revel in the telling of it; some in listening to it. Imperishable is the memory of my own children—six of them—as they listened nightly to the stories I told them. They would sit, wonder-eyed. Neither they nor I knew what the next exciting incident would be! Half-reality, half-fantasy—that was a delightful mixture.

Those years are gone and now my offspring tell stories to their own children.

What is it then which makes us love stories, both in the telling and the hearing? Why is it that imagination is at its best and freest in the telling of fiction?

For children, stories provide a way to learn about ideas and action. Through them, they are also virtually told that there is no place in this world for dry literalism or deadening realism. Fantasy is a way of developing the visual mind, and giving life to what would be otherwise mere facts or dull incidents.

I have, however, discovered that there is even more to it than a deliberate heightening of delight or a stimulation of the adrenalin gland. It is the fact of the surprising nature of man which quickens interest and brings immense pleasure. Man, of course is a special creature. His goodness is stunningly wonderful; his evil incredibly horrible. Each story teller and story-listener has affinity—at least in imagination—with others of the human race. He can be delighted by rich accomplishments, stung into anger by injustice, terrified by mystery, awed by the noumenous and shocked by the blackness of evil. Stories call out his emotions, and at depth and for the most part, man is an emotional creature. He has great powers of empathy.

Fiction, then, is a way of talking about reality. Reality—at least to pragmatic man—is the world about him; the flora, the fauna, and man himself. Man generally wants to know reality but then not in a dry, factual, literalistic manner. He appreciates the team of writers, which works for him. They stimulate his imagination. They give him new information. They evoke dreams, visions, ambitions and—sometimes—actions. They light up the world around him: reality is clothed with freshness. Conversely, sometimes these artists play on his heartstrings the songs of doom, of horror, and of despair.

Whatever it is they do—by fair means or foul—they bring into play the emotions, which are an important part of man's created personhood. Birth, life, death, purity, evil, love and hatred are the perpetual themes, the eternal subjects, and no creation of an artist is ever identical with that of another.

There are those who despise fiction, seeing it only as futile escapism, wasted stimulation of the emotions, and the purveying of what is virtually untruth. They see it as empty and false, devoid of basic reality.

In some ways they are right. Technically speaking, fiction is not fact and there is some validity in the dry old cliché that truth is stranger than fiction.

Yet man, in writing or telling fiction, is really drawing somewhere on what is truth.⁴

Preachers and congregations recognise that Spirit-inspired retelling of biblical stories have proven to be a powerful medium for imparting truth, for sharing the gospel.

⁴ G. C. Bingham, 'An Essay on the Short Story', in *Angel Wings*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1983 (1981), p. xiii-xiv

GOD'S STORY—YOUR STORY—MY STORY

The diagram-makers have sometimes identified this 3-way dynamic, for the gospel:

1. I tell "*my story*", praying for you to hear with faith,
2. You identify or make connections with some aspects of "*your story*", and
3. The Spirit of God reveals and incorporates us into "*God's story*".

The gospels are unique, as are the biblical stories, in that people are encountering the Living God, the Christ of history, in the midst of their wanderings, illness, tasks, sins, mistakes, faithlessness, religion, desperate prayers and personal agendas. That is part of the reason why they are so powerful. For in the midst of our daily life, God—in grace and in mercy—comes looking for us (Luke 15).

All people are all in one way or another caught up into their sinfulness and lack of faith, and their failure to live by every Word that proceeds from God. Yet the God of all grace 'enters' the tragic scene of our own attempts at life, with his life-changing presence and power, and draws us into the great, grand, deep and profound story of the Triune God.

THE EVER-PRESENT, MASTER STORY TELLER

This masterful story (Luke 15) has... a mysterious, innate capacity to connect:

11 Then He [Jesus] said: "A certain man had two sons. 12 "And the younger of them said to *his* father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls *to me*.' So he divided to them *his* livelihood. 13 "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with **prodigal** living. 14 "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. 15 "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*. 17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. 18 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 19 "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. 23 'And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry; 24 'for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

25 "Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' 28 "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 "So he answered and said to *his* father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 'But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 'It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'"