

LEARNING
GOD'S
STORY OF
GRACE

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GRACE

A Living Story Book

Elizabeth Reynolds Turnage

P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

Long before *Living Story* was a Bible study series, website, weekend retreat, coaching vehicle, and consulting practice, it was a way of life for my friend Elizabeth Turnage. Over the past several years, I've had the privilege of watching Elizabeth marinate in the gospel of God's grace and come alive to its radical and transforming implications. I'm thankful to see this firsthand, because the people I trust the most to tell me about Jesus are those who continually demonstrate just how much they need Jesus. Hypothetical grace only avails hypothetical sinners. Theoretical mercy only avails the theoretically broken. Metaphorical living water only quenches those who metaphorically thirst.

Quite literally, I saw *Living Story* become a seed, long before it even got planted. And since germination, this ministry has been growing as an expression of Elizabeth's growth in grace and understanding of the big narrative that runs from Genesis through Revelation. That journey and process will be evident to you in the following pages and exercises.

Here's the main thing that excites me about the gift Elizabeth offers us. She shows us the vital connection between the main story line of the Bible and our stories of God's transforming grace. In short, Elizabeth helps us find our place in God's story—God's *Living Story* of redemption and restoration. Each of us is called to be a character in and a carrier of this amazing story. Indeed, the gospel runs to us and through us, to the glory of God.

Sometimes God's grace and personal "story work" are presented in a vacuum, without any reference or clear connection to God's transforming kingdom. The impression is given that

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the gospel is primarily a means for helping us escape the prison house of legalism, bad self-imaging, and the talons of our broken family systems. The net result is liberated Christians who throw off the shackles of shame and guilt, reject performance-based living, and finally learn to be their own person. Not that all of that is bad, but the gospel calls us to far richer categories, and a much bigger vision and story.

On the other hand, the gospel is also presented, at times, almost exclusively in terms of fulfilling the Great Commission and engaging in issues of moral reform and social justice, while bypassing the dark continent of our own hearts. This results in dutiful Christians with little depth and authenticity, busy churches full of pragmatic agendas and type A personalities, and in time, empty believers marked more by posing and pretending than by faith expressing itself in love. This simply will not do.

Living Story celebrates God's commitment to make all things new through the person and work of Jesus—individuals, marriages, families, neighborhoods, and cities. Elizabeth helps us hear the echoes of Eden—the world for which God originally made us. She also helps us grieve the evidences of sin and death, rejoice in the provision of God's Son and God's gospel, and hope for the sure arrival of the new heaven and new earth. I am very thankful for my friend's hard work and tenderness of heart—as a person and as a servant of Jesus on the behalf of many, as she clearly is.

Scotty Smith

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One of my favorite story questions is, “How did I get *here*—to this place in my story?” The answer always involves characters who impacted the plot. I would like to thank everyone who played a part in the creation of this book, and in particular the following:

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INTRODUCTION

LEARNING STORY

Who am I? Where did I come from? Is there any meaning and purpose to my life? Whether you're seventy or seventeen, punk or prep, Native American or native African, these are the questions that rumble in our souls, according to anthropologists. The Bible acknowledges these questions too and exhorts us to know and tell our story. Remembering and communicating our history reminds us of the essential realities that influence how we live our daily lives.

My friend Joni grew up hearing her father shout, "I hate you! I wish you had never been born!" She needs to know that while she is a sinner, she was created with dignity and re-created through redemption. These parts of her story allow her to walk upright, proud, and free of fear because the God who created her delights in her even if her earthly father doesn't. Another friend tends to be judgmental because he focuses on the sins of others and minimizes his own. He needs to remember the story of Scripture, which explains our sin as the demand to have our way. When he sees his sinful heart though the lens of God's redemptive love, he doesn't spend so much time scrutinizing the sins and failures of others.

Both friends need to know the grand narrative Scripture tells. The gospel story sings a song of redemption with the following four parts:

INTRODUCTION

1. Creation tells us who we are, male and female, created in the image of God. It is characterized by shalom—peace, wholeness, harmony. Everything is the way it's supposed to be.
2. The fall tells us why we struggle with sin and live in frustration. It is characterized by wrecked shalom—sin has divided what was meant to be together, distorted beauty, and deconstructed wholeness. The effects of the fall are compounded when we try to restore shalom by turning to people, places, or things that make us feel significant. The Bible calls this idolatry.
3. Redemption tells of the sinless Savior, Jesus Christ, who rescued us from sin and death by living as a human, dying, and rising from the dead. This wild story of God's grace means that anyone who trusts in Christ for salvation is transformed to live the free life we were created to live. In this part of the story, shalom is partially restored: re-location, re-conciliation, and re-creation characterize our lives, even though the final day of restoration is still to come.
4. Consummation, the grand finale of the story, brings full restoration and begins our truest story: the life of harmony and wholeness in worship of the triune God.

Scripture shows us that our stories matter. Our life narratives follow the rhythm of God's story of grace: a period of shalom, the wrecking or unraveling of shalom, further deconstruction as we attempt to restore shalom on our own terms, and finally rescue and partial restoration of shalom with full restoration to come.

History is . . . a story written by the finger of God.

—C.S. Lewis, "Historicism"

LIVING STORY

Scripture calls us to learn and rehearse God's story of grace, because doing so calls us to live a life of faith, hope, and love—the essence of worship:

- ➊ Faith means trusting in God for life and hope rather than other gods.
- ➋ Hope means believing God is doing brand new things in the midst of wrecked shalom.
- ➌ Love is living and telling our story to a broken world sorely in need of a life-transforming story.

We need to learn God's story of grace in order to live it. Learning doesn't mean simply studying hard or pounding information into our minds. Learning means knowing. When the Bible speaks of knowing, it refers to a deep connection involving heart and mind. To know God is to be intimately connected with him. As we consider both the big story God has written in Scripture and the particular stories he is writing in our lives, we come to know God more deeply and love him more fully.

THE GUIDE

This Bible study aims to bring the transforming power of the gospel to bear on your life. As you interact with this

Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity . . . that God makes himself known to each of us most powerfully and personally.

—Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*

INTRODUCTION

material, I hope you will experience the freedom to live in God's story of grace with deeper faith, greater hope, and more passionate love. The format is designed to take you into the grand narrative of Scripture, your story, and others' stories by giving you opportunities to pray and live what you are studying. The following sections are found in each chapter to help you go deeper:

Engaging Scripture. Here you will focus on a passage or story from Scripture and answer questions for insight, reflection, and discussion. This draws us to worship God and follow Christ.

Theological Theme. This section discusses a theme that God consistently reveals through Scripture.

Entering Your Story. This section takes the passage and shifts the focus to what God is writing in your story. Here you will be given opportunities to write and tell your story.

Living Story. This section invites you to reflect on how you will live out the gospel in the topic being explored.

Praying Story. The final section offers an opportunity to write or say prayers regarding the story.

In addition to the format, here are a few suggestions to help you get the most out of this book.

Just do it! As a former stoic, I used to embrace this Nike slogan, but it didn't always lead to love. While I don't want you to fall into the trap of doing duty, I want you to engage the material. If the only thing you can do is read the Scripture, make sure you do that. The Bible is the living Word of God. Unlike any self-help book, just reading it transforms you! But please, do more.

Interact with the questions. The studies are divided into suggested amounts of material to cover over a five-day period. This gives you two extra days! Use the space in the book, or if you need more room, get a journal or create a document on your computer for walking through this guide. Let the questions wander around in your brain as you commute to work or clean the kitchen, and then write some things down. You may think you don't need to write anything down, but trust me—or at least trust cognition theorists—we learn, understand, and grow as we write.

Pray. Ask the Holy Spirit, whom God has given as “the helper” to come alongside you, to be your primary guide in the process of learning and living his story. Specific exercises for prayer are provided in each chapter.

Tell and listen. Each individual reflects God’s story of grace in a unique way. Gift others by sharing your responses and your story. If you tend to be more talkative, make room for the quieter ones to speak. Always listen carefully to others.

Enjoy. We were made to worship, to give and receive delight in God’s story of grace. My deepest hope is that you will enjoy being transformed by the gospel, the amazing true story in which we are called to live and love.

1

STORY MATTERS

KEY THEMES:

- ❶ Remembering and rehearsing God's story of grace helps us turn away from our sin to trust in God (repentance).
- ❷ Remembering God's amazing grace draws us to live a life of obedience out of our gratitude for his rescue in our lives.

DAY 1

It was early, and I kept the lights low in the kitchen as I began my daily ritual. While the coffee brewed, I grabbed the small sample bottle of anti-inflammatory medication I took to ease body aches. Without looking, I reached in to remove a pill. The cotton felt unusually thick and sticky. I shook the bottle. No rattle. That's when I turned on the light and tried to rouse my sleep-laden eyes to look. What I found did not surprise me as much as it might surprise you. Stuck in the pill bottle instead of cotton was a large, white marshmallow!

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As odd as it was, I guessed pretty quickly what had happened. One of my four children must have found the empty bottle and decided to replace the “marshmallow” that I regularly pulled out of it.

God’s story matters. Your story matters too. But our stories don’t always make much sense to us. Sometimes we can easily figure out an explanation while other times we continue to shake our heads (or our fists) for days at our confusion or disappointment. Psalm 78 shows us how much our story matters by revealing two major characteristics of the biblical narrative.

- ❶ First, the Bible as a whole is a very puzzling but absolutely true tale.
- ❷ Second, even the simplest stories reveal profound truths.

With these ideas in mind, let’s look at Psalm 78 to understand how much our story matters.

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE: PSALM 78

Background

Genre. A Psalm: from the Hebrew word *tehillim*, which means “praise.” Ironically, over 70 percent of Psalms are actually laments. God wants to hear our full expression of praise, doubt, fear, and hope. He takes all of our emotions and brings them to praise.

Our greatest desire, greater even than the desire for happiness, is that our lives mean something. This desire for meaning is the originating impulse of story. We tell stories because we hope to find or create significant connections between things. Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going.

—Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*

Context. Psalms are Hebrew poems that are meant to be sung in community worship. These weren't just private prayers to God. Hebrew poetry uses a lot of repetition and rhythm, so we may not always get the full effect in English.

Psalm 78: A Story to Remember

Psalm 78 is a long Psalm calling the Israelites to remember the story of God's grace and mercy. It depicts Israel's history as one of forgetfulness and disobedience followed by remembrance and repentance. Set aside ten minutes to read the whole Psalm to get a sense of the redundancy of Israel's cycles of sin and the relentlessness of God's mercy and forgiveness. This pattern offers good news to us today, particularly because Christ the Savior brought an end to the cycle of disobedience and rebellion.

1. Read Psalm 78. Choose a verse you would like to memorize for this particular study. Find one that feels personal to you and your story. Write it here or on a note card or sticky note.

STORY MATTERS

The following is an outline of Psalm 78 to help you see some of the cycles:

- Part 1: A Call to Remember and Tell (vv. 1-8)
- Part 2: Forgetting His Works and Wonders (vv. 9-16)
- Part 3: Sin and Disbelief (vv. 17-31)
- Part 4: Repentance, False Repentance, and God's Mercy (vv. 32-39)
- Part 5: More Forgetting and Remembering (vv. 40-64)
- Part 6: End of Story: God's Mercy (vv. 65-72)

2. Part 1: Read verses 1-8.

- a. Asaph asks the people to listen to his teaching. What is the content of this teaching (vv. 2-4)? What do the words “hidden lessons” and “parables” suggest to you about the Israelites’ history?

The psalms express every emotion that human beings experience. The laments articulate our fear, despair, shame, and anger. The hymns express joy, love, and confidence. As we read the words of the psalmist, they become our own. They help us understand what is going on inside of us. But even more, they minister to us as they direct us toward God.

—Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*

- b. Describe some of the effects rehearsing this history will have (vv. 6–8). How has telling or hearing stories of rescue and redemption impacted you?
3. Part 2: Read verses 9–16.
 - a. Name some of the marvels/miracles the Ephraimites forgot (vv. 13–16). What did forgetting lead them to do (vv. 9–11)?

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- b. Do you ever forget stories of how you have been rescued? What happens when you forget?

DAY 2

1. Part 3: Read verses 17–31.
 - a. How do the Israelites' sin and disbelief grow and worsen (vv. 17–20)?
 - b. How does God respond? Name some elements of provision and some elements of discipline (vv. 21–32).

Theological Theme: Repentance

The word *repent* has gotten a bad rap from street preachers who stand on the corner screaming it. But when understood in the context of the grand narrative of Scripture, it becomes an invitation to freedom. Repentance means to turn away from doing things our own way in order to follow God and rest in his provision and plan for our lives. Psalm 78 invites us to think about this true repentance that is found throughout the Bible.

Parts four and five of the psalm tell of God's chosen people raising their fists at him, shouting their unbelief, and turning their backs on his kind provision. God waits patiently for them to turn back toward him, and when they do not, he brings discipline with the purpose of leading them to repentance.

The people initially seem to repent, but verse 36 tells us their repentance only appeared to be sincere. In fact, they were flattering God, or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "They didn't mean a word of it; they lied through their teeth the whole time. They could not have cared less about him, wanted nothing to do with his Covenant." False repentance often involves people working harder to do better in their own effort. It is often motivated by a desire to stay out of trouble and is marked by a goal of keeping the peace.

True repentance comes from the heart. It trusts in our Savior, Jesus Christ, to bring about the change, while it cooperates with God in that transformation. Its motivation is godly sorrow, a real sense of having harmed God by living life our own way. The end goal is to restore shalom, which means hoping and looking for reconciliation between God and others.

STORY MATTERS

- c. Why did God respond the way he did? What kind of response was he hoping to evoke? (Read Heb. 12: 5-11.)

2. Parts 4 and 5: Read verses 32-64.
 - a. What result does God's punishment have (vv. 32-37)?

 - b. What reason does the psalmist give for God's choice not to destroy the Israelites? What does this show us about ourselves? What does it show us about God and the basis for our salvation (vv. 38-39)?

3. Part 6: Read verses 65–72.
 - a. The psalm ends depicting God’s amazing grace to the Israelites. What does God do for the Israelites (vv. 68–70)?
 - b. What is hopeful about the way the psalm ends (vv. 70–72)?

Asaph tells us a very strange story in Psalm 78. In verse 2, the Hebrew words for “story” are *mashal* and *chiyddah*, which suggest puzzles, hard questions, and riddles. Asaph may have chosen these words to communicate that Israel has a puzzling history. Perhaps he is saying, “Listen to this history and try to explain why people would repeatedly reject a God who not only performs such signs, wonders, and miracles, but who bothers to retrieve this stubborn, disobedient people. What kind of sense does it make to be so faithless and fickle in light of the Lord’s unfailing love and kindness? And what kind of sense does it make to be so faithful and loving in light of the Israelites’ faithlessness and forgetfulness?”

- ❸ Review your memory verse. Say it aloud three times.

DAY 3 & DAY 4**ENTERING YOUR STORY****A “Living Stone” Story**

Joshua 4 tells a story in which the Israelites are instructed to gather stones from the riverbed God had dried up so they could cross it. It seems a little bizarre, but Joshua explains the following to his people: “In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever” (Josh. 4:6-7). Our stories are our memorials of what God has done for us. As we learn to collect and recollect them, our faith will grow. The following story is an example:

Many years ago a tragedy struck our church family. Our youth pastor’s wife had been badly burned in a grease fire. With burns covering 38 percent of her body, she lay like a bandaged mummy in the burn treatment center nearby; her hope for full recovery looked bleak. I was struggling with God over the situation, praying my childish criticisms. “If you are going to treat these two dear young servants like this, I quit! Why should I trust you when you let things like this happen? What kind of God are you?”

I was depressed and angry, but as a mother, I could not stay in my study sobbing all afternoon. I had to take my children to swim lessons at the local health club. I sat glumly at the edge of the pool, feet dangling in the water, staring into it hoping for clarity to come. A gentleman came and stood next to me, watching his grandson. He remarked, “Boy, I had a tough run tonight!” I looked toward him and found myself eye level with his right leg, which bore a ghastly scar beginning near his ankle and stretching up above his knee. The scarred leg stood in a running shoe elevated by a platform. I knew this man, and I knew his story well. Because I knew his story, I had the strange urge

to laugh at his complaint of a tough run. God had placed beside me a living stone.

Let me explain my seemingly cruel urge to laugh. This man was one of my husband's former patients. About five years before, early on a Sunday morning, my husband, an orthopedic surgeon, was called into a horrible trauma involving this man. A local pastor, he had arisen well before dawn to complete a training run for the New York marathon before he led multiple church services. He was running on a major highway and a drunk driver had crossed the road and struck him from behind. After seeing the pastor's wound, Kip feared the injury might end in amputation of the limb—the leg was shattered, and the wound was full of road rash that could easily lead to infection. The idea that this man might ever run again did not cross Kip's mind.

And there he stood next to me, wondering like any other runner why his run had been difficult that evening. God had so healed him that he hardly gave a thought to the devastation that this leg had endured some five years before. It was a living stone—in living color and flesh—a picture to me of what God can do when all seems hopeless.

Choose one of the topics below to reflect on how your story matters. Question 1 takes you through any story. Question 2 is focused on a “Living Stone” story.

1. Think of some stories in your life that seem confusing.
 - a. Without trying to explain them, write down what is confusing about them.

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- b. Write out one of the confusing stories of your life. Don't try to bring resolution, but consider writing a prayer at the end about what confuses you.
2. Write out a “Living Stone” story (see example above). Use the following guiding questions to get you started. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you remember and to write the story as you recall it.
 - a. Can you think of a time when you felt doubt and desperation, but you were encouraged to set your hope anew on God?
 - b. What was the difficult situation you faced?

- c. Did God remind you of how he had rescued you in previous situations? If so, what was the reminder (some possibilities: a story, a visual reminder, a song)?

DAY 5

LIVING STORY

1. Review Psalm 78:32–37. About the repentance of the Israelites, Eugene Peterson says, “They didn’t mean a word of it; they lied through their teeth the whole time. They could not have cared less about him, wanted nothing to do with his Covenant” (MSG).

Repentance is not a decision of the will to do right instead of wrong. It's an internal shift in our perceived source of life. Ultimately repentance is a humble broken return to God, but there's a catch. We are utterly unable to do it. Repentance is not something we can decide to do and then do it; it's something God works in us. Then what's our part? Our part is getting ready for God to work repentance in us. Before God can turn us, we have to become deeply dissatisfied with the way things are now. That's where we're hungry for change and hopeful that change is possible.

—Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

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2. Consider the following pitfalls of false repentance, then check the traps you have fallen into. Make notes about when you recall doing any of the following:

- Feeling sorry about the consequences of your sin, but not the heart attitude underneath (being sorry you got caught, not sorry you did it).

- Focusing on doing better and working harder.

- Ignoring the heart attitude underlying the behavior—pride, self-righteousness, fear, or demandingness.

- Asking someone to forgive you so you can feel better about yourself.

3. Below is a list of marks of true repentance. Pray about these, remembering times of turning that were characterized by these attitudes. Ask God to continue to grow you in a lifestyle of repentance.

- Overwhelmed by God's grace.
- Humbled by the depths of demandingness in our own hearts.
- Feeling sorrow that we have hurt another in our sin.
- Knowing that only God can transform our hearts.
- Turning away from the things that make our hearts feel safe, secure, and significant and instead trusting in God to provide those things.

PRAYING STORY

Choose one of the following options for praying the story of this chapter:

1. Write a prayer of thanksgiving, thanking God for some of the marvelous works he's done in your life.

The shortest road to repentance is remembrance. Let someone once recall what they used to be and reflect on what by God's grace they could be, and they will be led to repent, turning back from their sin to their Saviour.

—John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*

2. Write a prayer of repentance, telling God how you have tried to make life work apart from him. Ask him to help you experience his mercy and forgiveness just as it is depicted in his kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of the Israelites.

- ❸ Review your memory verse. Think of a creative way to share it with someone.

Moving Forward

Psalm 78 is one of many places in Scripture that calls us to remember and rehearse God's story of grace within our own stories. We are urged to learn and recite our stories:

1. To turn away from a stubborn persistence in living life on our own terms (repent)
2. To trust in God to rescue and redeem this wrecked world because he has done so in the past
3. To hope in God in the present because of what he has already done and what he will do on the final day
4. To love others well by showing grace because we have received mercy and by telling the story that is the basis for our faith and hope

As we have seen, God's grand narrative is indeed a strange and wonderful story. In the next chapter, we will consider its implications for our lives.