



Gospel

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Introduction

It should be easier than telling someone about your favorite television program. It should be easier than sharing your enthusiasm for a particular team. It should be easier than sending a Facebook “like” message. It certainly is more important and invites others into a life-changing experience. Telling another person about God’s love in Jesus Christ and the difference that has made in your life should be the easiest thing of all.

But most of us have not found this to be easy. We worry about what to say. We wonder how our words will be received. We are uncomfortable talking about ourselves. We are concerned about intruding into another’s space. And we certainly don’t want to sound judgmental.

Yet, what could be more rewarding than guiding someone else to the abundant life of grace and love that we have come to know in Jesus Christ? What could be more significant than leading someone to the source of life’s meaning and purpose? What could be more joyful than to welcome someone into the body of Christ, the community of faith? What could be more fulfilling than to cooperate with God’s healing, reconciling, and redemptive work?

The resources *Engage: Gospel*, *Engage: Discipleship*, and *Engage: Mission* have been created to make sharing the good news of Jesus Christ just a bit easier. Putting in a good word for Jesus, especially among people needing to hear that word, is never easy. But joining together to share our faith openly, to enlarge our understanding, to connect our stories with God’s redemptive story, to practice various approaches, and to encourage and pray for one another will make our call to be evangelists easier.

Yes, you are called to be an evangelist! You are called to share your faith in Jesus Christ and to serve others in his name. You are called to embody and proclaim love in the midst of fear, life in the midst of death, and hope in the midst of despair. You are called to share a passion for the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. This may not be the easiest thing you have been called to do but it is by far the most rewarding. Grace and peace to you!

Boyd Lien

Engaging Your Story

Scripture

Luke 19:1–10 Jesus and Zacchaeus
Philippians 1:3–5 Paul's joyful prayer

Prayer

Loving and Holy God, we give you thanks for the gift of your grace in Jesus, which continues to transform our lives. For the people who have helped us see you and draw closer to your call on our lives, we are grateful. As we give you praise for the many ways that your love has been invested in us, we seek your strength as we live into our stories of faith with confidence and hope. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Encounter

In the forty-eight years since I was first ambushed by Jesus in a little chapel in the Allegheny mountains in western Pennsylvania, and literally the thousands of hours of prayer and meditation, silence and solitude over those years, I am now utterly convinced that on Judgment Day the Lord Jesus is going to ask us one question, and only one question: "Did you believe that I loved you, that I desired you, that I waited for you day after day, that I longed to hear the sound of your voice?"¹

These words from Brennan Manning, carefully chosen to tell his story of faith in Jesus Christ, come from his life experiences and provide just a glimpse of a much larger story.

Each one of us has a story to tell. We have been changed by what God has done in Jesus Christ, and God's unconditional love has transformed our lives. If we stop for a moment and rest in God's love of us, we begin to realize that our relationship with God is making all the difference. We realize we do have a story to tell about God's amazing love. It matters not how we came to faith; all that matters is that we have faith. And faith is a gift.

*Each one of us
has a story to tell.*

1. From *Brennan Manning Live at Woodcrest*, youtube.com/watch?v=pQI_IDVZhgM.

Each of us has a different story to tell. Some are clear stories of conversion, times when we can clearly, distinctly mark that our lives were out of control and had little meaning until we met Jesus. Others of us have never known a day in which we did not have an experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Even so, we are able to mark the time in our lives when our faith in God became our own personal faith and less the faith of those who encouraged us along the way. Our call, as those who have encountered Jesus Christ, is to live out of a personal relationship as we seek to follow him.

Explore

Engage: Gospel seeds to offer encouragement as well as provide possible approaches for sharing faith in Jesus Christ with those individuals who are around us. The seven sessions, each centered in a biblical encounter with Jesus, are intended to deepen our awareness of God's love, intensify our response to God's call on our lives, and strengthen our abilities to share the good news of Christ.

Read Luke 19:1–10 to examine the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Try to imagine what life must have been like for Zacchaeus. Here are some things to ponder about his life:

- Scripture records that Zacchaeus was small and needed to climb a tree to see Jesus. Apparently, he had no friends along the parade route to help him see Jesus. Zacchaeus, who worked for the Roman Empire, not only collected taxes for the occupying power but likely also took extra taxes to increase his riches. These actions made him a despised man in the community. Notice that as Zacchaeus scrambles through the crowds to get a glimpse of Jesus, not one person in the crowd says to him, "Hey, step in front of me; I want you to see him!"
- The cool thing is that he climbs a tree to see Jesus, and Jesus notices him up in that sycamore. Jesus invites him to come down from the tree, and then Jesus takes another step toward intimacy: he enters into the home of Zacchaeus!
- Because Zacchaeus meets Jesus and forms a personal relationship with him, his life is transformed. He makes amends with the people he has cheated, and he decides to serve the poor.

As one explores this story further, it is possible to identify three phases of Zacchaeus's transformation: the time before he encounters life's meaning, his experience of meeting the love of God in Jesus Christ, and a

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life lived in response to God's love. Consider the ways these three phases of transformation take place with Zacchaeus by sketching out a simple time line of his life. Even though little additional information is shared in this brief story, we are still able to imagine what might have happened.

Draw a horizontal line on a sheet of paper. First, place some markers along the left part of the line to indicate the period of Zacchaeus's life before he climbed the sycamore tree to meet Jesus. What are some possible experiences he had as a child, youth, and adult?

Second, place a mark to signify the day he met Jesus. What type of mark should describe the occasion? An exclamation point? A question mark? A shining sun? A tree? A bolt of lightning? A smiley face?

Third, place some markers to the right of that marker to indicate events in Zacchaeus's transformed life. We know he sought to make things right with those he had cheated. But what other things might he have done? Was Zacchaeus present at other events in Jesus' ministry? Is it possible he traveled from Jericho to Jerusalem and was there to witness Jesus' final week? Could he have been among the crowds lining the street on Palm Sunday? Was he among those looking on at Jesus' crucifixion?

Our speculation about Zacchaeus's new life of faith could go on and on. But we will draw even closer to the story of Zacchaeus by examining our own faith stories and sketching out our personal time lines.

Engage

What does it mean to engage the gospel? The word *engage* can be used in a variety of ways. The definitions that relate to this study include the following:

- To pledge; to promise
- To draw into; to involve
- to involve oneself or become occupied; to become engrossed; to participate.²

Each of the definitions suggests a way we may respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet even as we seek to engage the gospel, God reaches out in Christ to seek and engage us.

Engage ("participate in," "draw into," "be engrossed in") the continuing story of God's love in Jesus Christ by sketching out a time line of your life. Make it as simple or as intricate as you wish.

Draw a horizontal line on a sheet of paper. Starting from your birth and continuing to the present moment, indicate significant events that have

² *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

happened in your life. Whether whatever took place was a mountaintop experience or a desert wandering, a time of intense significance or a period of steady consistency, mark the event on your time line. Designate in some way whether you feel the experience drew you closer to God or kept you at a distance from God. In what way will you mark those life events that occurred before you encountered life's meaning? What type of marker would be appropriate for your experience of meeting God's love in Jesus Christ? A cross? A heart? An exclamation point?

After that initial meeting, what significant experiences will you want to add further along the time line? As you look over your time line, think about those events that continue to exert power in your life.

What conversations do you continue to have with the past? At which times along your time line are you able to respond affirmatively to Jesus' question, as imagined by Brennan Manning: "Did you believe that I loved you, have with the past? that I desired you, that I waited for you day after day, that I longed to hear the sound of your voice?"

Engaging *your* story, and in doing so engaging the gospel, is a crucial part of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with someone else. It may be that drawing a horizontal line may have depicted your life too simply, as if it has unfolded effortlessly. A wavy or jagged line with highs and lows might seem more accurate—or a line that is broken and reconnected at those times you were able to find your way again. No matter what the time line looks like, God has been present at every point in your life, whether recognized or not. Along with those Spirit-filled moments in which you were sure of God's presence, looking back also allows you to become aware of the less-obvious fingerprints God has left on your life.

Express

The apostle Paul, in a joyful letter to the church in Philippi, wrote, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5). Just imagine the names that came to mind as Paul remembered those who had come to faith in Jesus Christ and were now partners in the gospel.

Paul experienced a dramatic conversion to faith in Christ. On the way to persecute Jesus' followers, he encountered Jesus! Paul's life was dramatically turned around, and he was sent to preach the good news of Christ to Jews and Gentiles. Following his life-changing encounter on the road to Damascus there was even more to come. Paul's transformation continued through

the care, teachings, and guidance of others. In Antioch, Barnabas and other Christians, earlier called "Followers of the Way," taught, encouraged, and prayed for one another.

Your experience of meeting the love of God in Jesus Christ may have been a dramatic, life-changing experience, or your story may witness to a steady, growing, confident awareness of God's presence and providence in your life. Yet whatever your story is, like each one of us, you have been cared for, guided, loved, lifted up, and inspired by other Christians.

Remember the name of someone who has helped you see and know Jesus, someone through whom you have experienced a life-changing relationship with God. It could be a parent, friend, Sunday school teacher, youth group advisor, mission trip leader, or countless others in the family of faith. Consider the impact of that person on your life. Inspired by Paul, write a letter to that person expressing thanks for the ways he or she helped you to know Jesus' love for you. Whether the person is alive or no longer living, write the letter and, if possible, send it through the mail. Inspired by Paul, do not send an e-mail, but write a letter by hand that will be treasured and saved.

Of course, engaging the gospel comes with a call to you to care for, guide, lift up, and inspire others. Reflect on the people in your life whom you can help to see and to know Jesus. In what ways can you be a winsome guide to a person seeking to know Jesus Christ? What is it about your life experiences that could be helpful in sharing faith with someone else? Just imagine: someone completing an activity like this in the future may be thinking of you and thanking you!

This week in your prayers imitate the apostle Paul. Pray with joy for all those who have shared their faith in Jesus Christ with you and have helped you come to faith. Pray for openness to those individuals in your life whom you can help to see Jesus. Name their names, thanking God for all that has been and all that is yet to be.

God's Story of Creative Purpose

Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.
The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be As long as life endures.³

Engage in witnessing to God's amazing love and grace by annotating the hymn with your personal touch. Think about what the following lyrics mean to you, and then add your notes:

"That saved a wretch like me:"

"I once was lost, but now am found:"

"'Twas blind but now I see:"

Reflect on the following questions:

- What have you come to know about the grace of God?
- In what ways does this hymn describe your journey of faith?
- What have been some of your life's "dangers, toils, and snares?"
- What comes to your mind and heart when you sing, "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far" and "The Lord has promised good to me?"
- In what ways does this hymn help describe what it means to rest in and trust in in Jesus?



This week in your prayers, give thanks to God for all those who remain in Jesus and are given nourishment to bear the fruit of the Spirit. Express gratitude for all those times you have witnessed "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

In addition, you may wish to view the video *The Vine* on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website (pcusa.org/engage/engage-gods-story/the-vine/).



3. *Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), no. 280.
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Scripture
Genesis 1:1-2:3 God's good creation
Mark 2:1-12 Jesus and a paralyzed man

Prayer

O God, out of your enduring love, you created a beautiful and magnificent world. You created humans in your image. Your creative love gave us a specific purpose to love you, love one another, and care for creation. However, we decided that we would rather be you than worship you. We are a broken people who have strayed far from your intended purpose. In our remorse, we give you all praise that you do not leave us in our brokenness. You offer a way out. This is our story. This is our story. In Jesus' healing name we pray. Amen.

Encounter

We all have personal stories of faith that we are called to live into and share. However, each of our personal stories of faith is contained within a much larger story that we are also called to share. This larger story is the story of Scripture; it is all about God's loving purpose. This story begins with God. It is about a God who creates this beautiful world. We're called to love God and to serve God, to care for this beautiful creation, and to love one another. When we recite A Brief Statement of Faith in worship, we affirm the following:

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father:
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hid from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,

and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.¹

Even though creation started as good, central to the story of creation is that it was broken by sin. According to Scripture, humanity's sin was that we wanted to be like God; we were not content with our purpose of loving God, loving others, and caring for creation. The Hebrew word for sin means that we have missed the mark.

How we address sin is critical to our understanding of the mission of the church. When it comes to addressing sin, we seem to either stress grace and de-emphasize obedience or overlook grace and begin with the message of getting one's life straight. But what if the two things actually go together? We are justified by an unconditional love and set on a path of *sanctification* (made into Christ's likeness) that leads us into lives of obedience and holiness.

Explore

When we look at Scripture, we do not always take in the big picture. The purpose of time spent in Scripture is to understand ourselves as part of God's mission (*missio Dei*) to reach and rescue creation with loving purpose. This mission is to be consummated by God. In other words, God will complete what God starts.

Read Genesis 1:1–2:3 to see the good and beautiful world that God created in the beginning. The Scriptures affirm that in the end God will complete this good and beautiful creation (Revelation 21:1–5, 22–27; 22:1–5).

*We have missed
the mark.*

Notice how many times the word *good* occurs in this passage. What in creation is “very good”? The biblical story of creation is unique because it begins with goodness. Many creation narratives begin with a battle between competing gods, and out of this battle, the world is made. However, our story does not begin with conflict; rather it starts out as good. We have a purpose to love God and one another and to care for creation. People ponder the questions “Why am I here?” and “What is my purpose in life?” In the Shorter Catechism, we read, “Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²

Although the Genesis story could have cited other human attributes, the one stated is that humans are created in the image of God. Humans bear their creator’s likeness? What responsibilities come from bearing the family likeness?

As the story continues, “good” is eventually joined by “evil.” The struggle between good and evil breaks the relationships humans have with God, creation, and themselves.

Yet God doesn’t leave us in our brokenness. The story continues with God reaching us through a people. It begins with Abraham and Sarah, then Rebekah and Isaac, then Jacob and Joseph, and then the whole people of Israel. The promise is this: If you will lean into me, if you will trust me, if you will go to a land that I am going to show you, then I will bless you. That blessing means you will know what a relationship with me is all about. You will live out of my love, and you will live full lives. Furthermore, the nations and the peoples around you will be blessed. They’ll know through you what a deep relationship with me is all about and what loving purpose is all about. God’s creative purpose is still good; in fact, it is very good.

Engage

God takes on human flesh and blood and enters into the world through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God offers all of us forgiveness and hope. The forgiveness is all about the ways we have missed the mark and can be healed. The hope is all about the life we experience in Jesus and how it brings us real and lasting lives. Because the thing about Jesus is this—he is the one unbroken person in all of creation. The promise is this—in a relationship with him, the brokenness inside of us is healed. The brokenness in our relationships is healed. And the brokenness in all of creation is healed.

Read Mark 2:1–12 to explore the encounter of Jesus and a paralyzed man.

1. *Book of Confessions*, 267–68. Reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

2. *Book of Confessions*, 7:001. Reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

This story, in which Jesus forgives sin and heals, reveals a crucial understanding of illness and healing story. Jesus, unlike many then and today, did not link illness with sin. Those who were severely ill in body and mind were not that way because they had sinned, just as those who were healthy and thriving were not that way because of their goodness and righteousness. The man is not paralyzed because he has sinned, and when the man's sin is forgiven, he remains unable to walk. Jesus then demonstrates not only his power to forgive sin but also his power to heal, and the man stands up.

Once again, enter into the biblical story, and engage your imagination to expand the story. What do you think may have happened next for the paralytic man after he was healed? Do you think he became an evangelist and put in a good word for Jesus? Did he share the good news of Jesus' healing with those who had only seen him lying on his mat? What do you think he thought about receiving Jesus' forgiveness for his sins? Can you think of how that forgiveness changed his life? Do you think he may have found opportunities to be with Jesus in other settings?

The struggle raging between good and evil continues to break and destroy our relationships with God, with creation, and among ourselves. Thus, to be a part of the church is to be on a healing journey, offering to others in our communities the healing that happens in God. Therefore, through the church the world begins to change as we live our lives in this very different way. Racism is eradicated; there is no more poverty, homelessness, or pollution. When people experience the church, people actually experience the way things were intended to be at the beginning of time but also the way things will be when God completes, rescues, and restores this broken creation. That's a part of what it means to be evangelists, to be on this healing journey with God for the healing of the world.

EXERCISES

In closing out his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul writes, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). Focusing on God's good creation is a key part of the healing journey. We are all too easily drawn into focusing on the reverse of Paul's words: all that is phony, detestable, prejudiced, polluted, offensive, and worthless. Yet God's healing intentions are repeated each time we gather to worship. We confess our sin, receive Christ's forgiveness, and are set free to be new people in Christ. Think about these things!

Did you ever receive gold stars as a child for work that was well done? Did you ever give someone a gold star to reward a good job? People are still handing out stars. Notice those given in reviews to evaluate movies, television shows, and books. Usually ★★★★★ means the highest quality.

First, think about the ministry of your church and the many ways your family of faith is engaging the gospel. Which aspects of your ministry cause you to respond, "Good!" and "Very Good" and cause you to hand out gold stars? Picture your community in worship, gathered around Bible study, teaching and caring for children, celebrating at meals, serving those in need, inspiring your youth, spreading the good news, and visiting the sick and lonely. What receives ★★★★★? What receives less?

Second, think about those parts of your church's ministry where you may award only one or two stars. These may be areas in which your church is missing the mark for a variety of reasons. Maybe you have become more inwardly than outwardly focused. Maybe there is tension in the body or a lingering resentment over a recent decision that needs to be dealt with.

Think about the ways God is calling you to help restore the body of Christ to goodness, even "very goodness," and thus cooperate in God's healing.

Third, take a close look at your own life and discipleship, not to focus on what is bad but to celebrate what is good. What parts of your day-to-day life would you award a ★★★★★ review? In what ways is the goodness of God's creation evident in your life and the

world around you? Consider taking time every day to notice, and perhaps record, the good things in your life, such as spending time with family and friends, working with colleagues, pursuing interests, helping out others, taking in the energy of the city, and just enjoying nature.

This week in your prayers, give thanks for all those who make up God's healing team. Pray for all who desire to act in love, who seek to forgive, and who work for reconciliation. Remember the ones who are in need of healing, those suffering in body and mind, and those with wounded relationships. Pray for the diverse and wonderful community God has called into your church to worship and to serve. Offer thanks for the ways you have personally known God's healing.