

Story *and* History



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 39:6–12, Josh. 3:9–17, 1 Sam. 24:1–6, 1 Kings 12:1–16, Job 1:1–12.*

Memory Text: “Every Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17, NET).

Though most folk harbor no great love for the study of history itself, most people do love a good story. Every civilization has a rich repertoire of stories that explain (or claim to explain) the origins, values, relationships, and structures of its culture. These stories, told over generations, are often teaching tools.

In the modern age, storytelling was downplayed: people looked for facts and scientific answers to explain life. However, facts alone could not answer life's most important questions. Today a new generation, often dubbed “postmodern,” has rediscovered the power of stories.

In that sense, the Bible is contemporary because it is full of stories. Not legends, not “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet. 1:16, *ESV*), but historical and personal stories that reveal truth about God and His interaction with fallen humanity. These stories describe real people, battling with real-life problems and interacting with the living God, who offers answers to these problems.

Every story needs a setting. This week we will explore different settings and their historical contexts in order to understand better the characters we'll be studying all quarter.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 2.*

People and Plots

Plot is defined as the succession of events that lead to a conclusion. Everyone is born, lives, and one day will die. These are the broad parameters of the *plot* of life. In between, life consists of many smaller plots that often are motivated by conflict or tension. Looking for a plot means trying to connect all the relevant parts of the story in order to see the big picture. In the book of Job, for example, there are two plots.

Identify the two plots in the story of Job. See Job 1:1–12.

If we want to understand the story of Job, we need to understand its two-dimensional plot. As a matter of fact, the Bible has no one-dimensional plots, because God always is active in history and human lives, even if working behind the scenes. In the first two chapters of Job, we can imagine changing channels, as on a TV set, as we jump between the earthly and the heavenly plots.

Stories, however, are more than plots. People make stories.

Describe in as much detail as you can the prophet Huldah as described in 2 Kings 22:14.

Characters are closely connected to the plot of the story. How we understand the character(s) depends to a large degree on the information given by the narrator, who may even be one of the characters. Let's take Huldah as an example: Is she one of the main characters in the story? No. This story actually is about the discovery of the book of the Law during the reign of King Josiah. Though Huldah may not be a main character, every character in a story is vital to the development of the story. Does Huldah have children? How old is she? We don't know the answers to these questions. Biblical narrative tends to be very concise and often abbreviated. This means that we need to pay close attention to every piece of information we are given. Huldah was regarded as a reliable prophetess of the Lord. The biblical author gives us information about her husband's family, because women during Old Testament times were identified with their husband's families. Her address also is given. As in modern times, official documents always require a name and an address to prove that a person is who he or she claims to be.

What is your plot? What kind of character are you? If your story was written as a Bible narrative, how might it read in contrast to how it *ought* to read?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Timothy 3:16, 17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize how characters, plots, settings, points of view, and historical backgrounds create memorable stories in the Bible.

Feel: Treasure the opportunity to become acquainted with Bible characters and learn from their life lessons.

Do: Take to heart the life lessons recounted in Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to use them to transform their lives.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Stories Critical for Today

A Like other stories, Bible stories contain characters that act and react within circumstances and settings. How are Bible stories unique? Why are these stories, set in times and places so different from ours today, so important?

II. Feel: Treasure Trove

A The authority of Scripture as God’s Word gives Bible stories an edge that most other stories don’t have. What points of view make them invaluable?

B How do the stories of Bible characters speak to us about our own lives?

III. Do: Buried Treasure

A Buried treasure does no one any good. How do we unlock the valuable lessons in Scripture stories and bring them to life in our own circumstances?

B Why is it critical to have the Holy Spirit interpret these stories?

C What quandaries in life do we face that need to be informed through the life lessons of Bible characters?

► **Summary:** We can benefit from an examination of Bible characters and how they faced the challenges in their lives, considering how they applied—or didn’t apply—godly principles in their life choices. Their stories can teach us to rely on God’s way to meet the challenges we face daily.

Where and How?

Setting conveys reality to the story and gives it atmosphere and mood. For example, why, in Ruth 4:1, 2, does Boaz locate his legal case in the gate and not in his home or in the house of the mayor of the city of Bethlehem? Obviously, the gate—being the most public place in ancient times—adds an important legal element to the story. Setting also can give us a clue about the time period in which the narrative unfolds. If we hear a story that is located inside a car or in an airport terminal, we know without much reflection that the story does not come from the time of David or Martin Luther.

Compare the settings of the following two stories: 1 Samuel 24:1–6 and Genesis 39:6–12. How do the settings contribute to the plots of the stories?

Settings help us to better understand the action of the story. David and his men are alone with Saul, who is unprotected and extremely vulnerable. The setting highlights the stellar character of David. He does not take advantage of this ideal opportunity to rid himself of Saul before Saul seeks to rid himself of David, a fact that reveals David's respect for God's anointed leader.

The setting in the story of Joseph also paints an opportunity. Joseph is handsome and in a position of power. His master's wife is infatuated with him, and they are alone in the house. Joseph, like David, shows his sterling character in resisting this opportunity.

But setting is not the only important element of a story. We need to look at the *point of view* of the narrator, as well. We see the story unfold through the narrator's eyes, which usually provides us with important information but sometimes may withhold information from us. This particularly is true in secular stories. Though we do have points of view in biblical accounts, we must read them on the assumption that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit and that the truth revealed is God's truth.

Think of David and Joseph in those particular settings. How easily they could have rationalized doing something other than what they did. The fact that they didn't tells us so much about their character. How often do you rationalize your wrong actions?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God is active not only in the broad sweep of history but also in the lives of individuals.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that while God is concerned with the fate of nations and peoples and planets, He also is capable of attending to the details of our lives if we submit ourselves to Him.

“Finding patterns where none exist.” A search of this phrase on Google yields numerous hits. If you investigate the results, you will find, naturally, a plethora of advertisements from people who want to sell you things you don’t need, from refrigerators to Angora rabbits. But if you move past the tables and wares of the cyber merchants, you will find examples of the many ways human beings attempt to discover patterns and meaning in the universe and in their own lives. The thirst for meaning and patterns incarnates itself in endless forms, from the superstitious to the downright strange: astrology birth charts, bizarre speculations about the ancestry of the British royal family, and quizzes and tests that will presumably tell us why we are the way we are. In other words, we tell ourselves stories that explain things.

The good news is that God never gives us the desire for something that doesn’t exist. Meaning and patterns are out there, but deriving them from anything less than a divinely inspired narrative is a way to, usually, get the story wrong. We are part of God’s story, and God wants to be in our story. Here’s a better phrase: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”

Discuss With the Class: In what ways do you see God’s story in your story? How does your life reflect God’s plan? How does it fit in with the larger story of salvation?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Plot: “Have You Considered My Servant Job?” (*Review Job 1:1–12 with your class.*)

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From Victory to the “Dark Ages”

For the rest of this week we will take a closer look at a few crucial periods of Israel’s history that will function as the backdrop for all the individuals we will be studying. We begin with Israel’s entry into the Promised Land.

After God’s mighty acts during the Exodus and the wilderness journey, the people of Israel have for a second time reached the border of the Promised Land. Under their new leader, Joshua, they are about to cross over the Jordan on dry land (*Josh. 3:16, 17*), a miracle that echoes the crossing of the Red Sea during the time of the Exodus (*Exodus 14*).

Read Joshua 3:9–17. What is the purpose of this miracle?

Canaan was not taken by Israel because of Joshua’s military genius or Israel’s valiant efforts. Victory over the inhabitants of the Canaanite city-states was achieved only by God’s powerful intervention. When Israel was obedient, God gave victory; however, when the Israelites relied on their own strength, they failed hopelessly.

After the death of Joshua and the elders, some sections of the Promised Land still were dominated by the Canaanites (*Judg. 1:27, 28*). It seems that the Israelites’ faith grew smaller as their vision shrunk. Instead of seeing the whole Promised Land in their possession, they became preoccupied with their own livelihoods and lost the larger vision and ideal that God had for Israel as a people. Many scholars call the following centuries the “dark ages” of Israel.

Read Judges 17:6. What kind of moral climate does it reveal?

When we lose the big picture of what God has in mind for us, minors become majors. Israel lost its perspective as a nation; tribalism took over. Throughout the book of Judges, the various tribes and clans were ready and willing to fight one another. Religious practices were fused according to personal convenience, and compromise with the surrounding cultures was widespread. According to the author of the book of Judges, this was caused by intermarriage with the Canaanites who were still living in the land (*Judg. 3:3–7*). As a result of this spiritual decline, Israel slipped into a cycle of domination by foreign powers, liberation, idolatry, and, again, domination.

What’s so dangerous about compromise is that it comes quietly, slowly, and almost imperceptibly. How differently do you live now than a few years ago? Might some of these changes be a result of compromise?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The book of Job concerns a region and a historical period that are peripheral to much of the Old Testament. For example, the exact location of Uz is disputed. Job is one of the few protagonists in the Old Testament who was neither an Israelite nor ancestral to the Israelites. Yet, nowhere else is the juxtaposition between the activity in human and divine realms so clear.

Job is described as a man who “feared God and shunned evil” (*Job 1:1, NIV*). In our world as it is, these characteristics aren’t always rewarded or esteemed. “Nice guys finish last,” we are told. People lose their careers for telling the truth or for following their conscience rather than the crowd.


This was not the case with Job. Job was “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (*vs. 3, NIV*). In a world in which riches and power are often mistaken for wisdom, intelligence, and virtue, Job was rich, powerful, wise, intelligent, and virtuous. And he knew where it came from, even if he could not have known about the spiritual war that was raging around him as *casus belli*.

Job, while he feared God and consulted Him even on the “minor” things in his life, probably never imagined himself as the topic of dinner conversation in heavenly realms. However, at the moment recounted in Job 1:6–12, the great controversy suddenly was specific. And it was specifically focused on him. Job’s reaction to evil was to shun it, to have nothing to do with it. This reaction was the right attitude; but it didn’t guarantee that the feelings were mutual. If God is active in our lives, Satan will try to be also. Any of us, like Job, can become disputed territory in the struggle between good and evil that we call the great controversy. This is the plot pervading even the most seemingly mundane stories found in the Bible.

Consider This: How literally should we take the idea of spiritual forces working behind the scenes as portrayed in Job 1:1–12? Why does it matter?

II. Character: What—and What Not—to Do and Be (*Review Genesis 39:6–12 with your class.*)

As stated before, the stories in the Bible are not merely stories. All Bible stories are about constructing a life that finds its center in the presence of God while living in a world that does not. Sometimes the protagonists recognize this imperative; other times they fail to. Either attitude—as well as the courses of action dictated by them—has consequences that can be

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Of Kings and Princes

Though given so much by God, and promised so much more—were they to obey—the Israelites were influenced negatively by the surrounding culture. For instance, they saw in the surrounding kingdoms a very different political structure. All of these nations had a king. Combined with the fact that Samuel’s sons did not emulate their father’s behavior and leadership but “took bribes, and perverted justice” (*1 Sam. 8:3, NKJV*), the tribal leadership of Israel felt that it was time to appoint a king over Israel (*vss. 4, 5*). Samuel is not at all happy with this decision but is told by the Lord to comply (*vs. 7*).

The Benjamite Saul is anointed as king by Samuel (*1 Sam. 10:1*) and begins his reign in Gibeon. However, as already foreseen by God, things are not easy for the new king. Tribal tensions continue. Israel’s very existence is in jeopardy due to pressure from the powers surrounding her. The new king is not committed to following God’s requirements (*1 Sam. 15:3, 8, 9*), and as a result, God finally rejects Saul.

Afterward, David is anointed as the future king of Israel. As expected, Saul does not want simply to hand over the power to the new military champion, David, and the next decade is marked by internal strife, with David always being on the run.

The next major turn in Israel’s history comes when Saul and his sons are killed in battle against the Philistines (*1 Sam. 31:1–6*). David is first made king over Judah and then, seven years later, over all of Israel. David establishes Jerusalem as the new capital of the united monarchy. His military exploits are successful; he extends the borders of the kingdom. After a forty-year reign, David dies in Jerusalem (*2 Sam. 5:4; 1 Kings 2:10, 11*). Similar to our own lives, David’s reign is marked by great victories, some bad choices, and a lot of God’s grace. He is succeeded by his son Solomon, who also reigns for forty years (*1 Kings 11:42*).

Solomon is not a warrior or conqueror. Instead, he seeks and receives divine wisdom (*1 Kings 3:3–13*); he constructs the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem; he designs efficient administrative structures that control and organize Israel; but, toward the end of his life, he turns away from the Lord, following the religious practices of his many wives (*1 Kings 11:1–8*).

Read 1 Samuel 8:7–20. How does this passage show that God’s ways are better than human ways? How often do we find ourselves doing the same thing, wanting to do things our own way instead of God’s?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

seen clearly in the development of the characters.

In the portion of Joseph's story found in Genesis 39:6–12, we have a typical account of a young man succeeding against the odds, a “fish out of water” in “a world he never made.” But Joseph's success was not merely because he was brave, intelligent, and resourceful, although success predicated on these qualities would be believable by the world's standards. The Bible counters this thinking of what constitutes success by revealing to us the key to Joseph's success. God “blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake” (*Gen. 39:5, NKJV*).

As in the book of Job, the presence of goodness and God's blessing attracted their opposite, in the form of Potiphar's wife and her special plans for Joseph. To a certain type of person, this might have appeared to be just another bit of luck. But faced with this dilemma, Joseph looked at the situation first from God's point of view and from what he stood to lose eternally should he succumb to seduction.

Consider This: God is always a character in the stories of the Old Testament, even if He appears not to be acting directly. His point of view always is represented. Is God's point of view always represented in your life?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that love is crucial to life itself, and in God's love we see love in its perfect form.

Thought Questions:

1 Why are the truths that God wants us to know often best communicated through narrative or story? This method of delivery is true in the New Testament, as well as the Old, as the basis of the Christian message is the four Gospels, all told as stories, and containing stories within stories, for instance, in parables.

2 Identify the larger narrative underlying all the narratives of the Bible. The names change. So do the characters, but the great controversy theme

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Rehoboam's Folly

Solomon's death marks another important turning point in Israel's history. The strong-handed administrative approach, the labor-conscription laws, and the experiments in religious pluralism all led to great tension at the beginning of the reign of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon.

Read 1 Kings 12:1–16 and try to capture the drama of the situation. As we look at Rehoboam's leadership, what can we learn from this story about our own attitudes toward whatever power we possess in various life situations? What can we learn from his mistake?

After the division of Judah and Israel, God's once-united people began to go different ways. Seeing that the center of worship, sacrifice, and adoration was located in Judah, King Jeroboam I of Israel had two golden calves made (*1 Kings 12:26–29*) and set up two places of worship with altars—one in Bethel and the other in Dan. Things did not look good for Israel, and over the next two hundred years the Israelites had a roller-coaster experience. Some kings followed (at least halfheartedly) God's call to repentance; others stubbornly refused to listen to the prophets. Dynasties changed, and political assassination abounded. Twenty kings reigned from Jeroboam I to Hoshea, the last king of Israel in Samaria, signaling the unstable condition of the kingdom. Finally, in 722 B.C., Samaria was captured by the Assyrians, and Israel was taken into captivity.

On the other side of the border, things did not look much better. The Davidic dynasty was maintained, but not all the descendants of David could emulate the faith of their forefather. Some kings, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, tried to return to the Lord and in the process also bring Judah as a whole to repentance. Their efforts were aided by scores of prophets who spoke to particular situations and specific spiritual and social needs in Judah.

In 586 B.C. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The leadership and much of the city's population were taken to Babylon. The temple was destroyed. The royal "experiment" had come to an end.

One would think that, with the disaster of the Babylonian destruction and captivity, that was the end of the Jewish people. What does their restoration after this calamity tell us about God's patience and grace? In what ways have you seen that same patience and grace in your own life? What should your reaction to this grace be?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

threads through the fabric of each story. What is the benefit in telling the same narrative in different forms?

Application Questions:

1 Many people today regard the stories of the Bible as taking place “long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” to borrow a popular phrase. Indeed, the events that the Bible records took place in a world quite different from our own, especially if we live in the secular West, where both religion and tradition generally have a weaker hold. How can we get past the initial resistance many people have to taking Scripture seriously in order to introduce them to its full, life-transforming power?

2 As Christians, we all have our own stories about how God has worked in our lives. What is the power of telling them, both for others and ourselves? Why do we ourselves sometimes need reminding of our own stories?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: The following activity is meant to emphasize the centrality of the master narrative of the great controversy to all the other stories and narratives of the Bible.

Activity: Review the essentials of the great controversy theme. Emphasize that it is a conflict between the agenda represented by Satan—for example, selfishness, the willingness to advance oneself without regard to God or others, the belief that the ends justify the means, and so on—and that represented by God, especially self-sacrifice, patience, peace, and humility.

Ask the class for examples of Bible stories and ask the members to summarize them as best they can. Ask them who or what in the story represented the satanic view of life and who or what represented God’s view. How did the events of the story mirror the great controversy? How did they fit into the larger narrative?

Further Study: “The Lord calls upon all to study the divine philosophy of sacred history, written by Moses under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The first family placed upon the earth is a sample of all families which will exist till the close of time. There is much to study in this history in order that we may understand the divine plan for the human race. This plan is plainly defined, and the prayerful, consecrated soul will become a learner of the thought and purpose of God from the beginning till the close of this earth’s history. He will realize that Jesus Christ, one with the Father, was the great mover in all progress, the One who is the source of all the purification and elevation of the human race.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 3, p. 184.

“In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what God has wrought, I am filled with astonishment and with confidence in Christ as Leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history. We are now a strong people, if we will put our trust in the Lord; for we are handling the mighty truths of the word of God. We have everything to be thankful for.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 162.

Discussion Questions:

- ① God’s active involvement in history is a very important concept in Scripture. Read Daniel 2:21. What does this passage say about the interaction between God and human history? Why is this reality so important for us to keep in mind today, for us who are living near the true “end of history”?
- ② Why do we like stories so much? What makes a good story? How can stories be very effective tools in teaching truth? Who are some of your favorite storytellers, and why do you like them?
- ③ The ancient Israelites had been called to be witnesses to the whole world of the true God and of His message regarding salvation by grace for everyone. Yet, look at how internal fighting so weakened ancient Israel. What lessons might we be able to draw for ourselves today from that sad historical truth?
- ④ Background is so important for understanding any situation. Yet, in most cases there’s much background information that we just don’t know about. Because so much is hidden from us, why is it so important that we not judge others? How often have you hastily judged someone before knowing important facts about the person and his or her circumstances? How often have you been judged by those who didn’t know all the pertinent facts about you?