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LIVING YOUR STORY · · · —

# Relationships Matter

SACRED  
STORY

## LIVING YOUR STORY

# Relationships Matter

Relationships form the core of our stories. The chapters of our lives begin with family relationships and expand to include friends, teachers, boyfriends, doctors, roommates, coworkers, neighbors, and many others. We kick off our time together by looking at the significance of people in our stories.

**Why do relationships make such a powerful impact in our lives?**

**Our parents help form the way we think about ourselves, others, and life in general. Give an example of how your mother or father shaped your thinking.**

Relating to people can result in many experiences we need for growth. We learn what compassion looks like, how to communicate our needs, how to develop friendships, and what it means to love. On the other hand, relating to people may damage our ability to grow as a person.

**What are ways relationships make a negative impact on us?**

From the beginning of time, God created human beings to live in relationship with Him and others. God's designed relationships to always be life-giving and promote growth. The Bible, claiming divine inspiration, says, "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female" (Genesis 1:27).

**Do you see people relating to others in ways which show what God is like? If so, how?**

Upon creating the first human beings, Adam and Eve, God walked with them in the garden and they experienced God's presence at all times. In Genesis 1:29, God says to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. . ." and then the Bible concludes, "God saw all that He made, and behold, it was very good" (1:31). Tragically God's design for relationships didn't remain in a state of "very good." God's protection of Adam and Eve included the mandate, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

**Why do you think God prohibited Adam and Eve from eating from this tree?**

We don't know definitively why God put the tree in the garden. We do know that God wants to be trusted. We also know that true love is love that is given when a person has a choice.

The serpent, bent on disrupting the harmony in the garden, approaches Eve and tells her God is lying about the consequences of eating from the tree: "You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). When Eve decides to believe the serpent over God, she eats from the fruit and offers it to Adam. The immediate effect is spiritual death and as a result, a loss of intimate friendship with God.

**Read Genesis 3:6-13.**

**What emotions do Adam and Eve experience? How do they deal with the reality of their sin? How do we hide from God today?**

The broken relationship with God through rebellion resulted in the event known as the “fall of mankind.” Sin occurred and separation from God entered the human race. In the book of Hosea God pours out His heart about the broken relationship (11:5,7,8) saying, “Because they refused to return to Me. . . So My people are bent on turning from Me. . . My heart is turned over within Me. All my compassions are kindled.”

Not only does God grieve the separation He experiences from those He created but also the devastation of sin within human relationships. When Adam and Eve conceived two sons, Cain and Abel, seeds of hostility grew as Cain became jealous of Abel and eventually killed his brother (Genesis 4:1-9).

### **What examples do you see in society of anger and jealousy tearing down relationships?**

The book of Romans describes the entrance of condemnation into the human race through Adam’s sin resulting in spiritual death. Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. . .” and 6:23 explains, “For the wages of sin is death. . .” As a holy God who is perfect in His character, He cannot be in the presence of sin. A great chasm exists between God and those He created.

God longs to restore the consequences of the fall of mankind. His divine love reaches out to men and women in their spiritual state of death. He provided for the penalty of sin through the sinless life of Jesus Christ and His death on the cross as payment for sin. Romans 5:19 expands, “For as through the one man’s disobedience (Adam’s) the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One (Jesus Christ) the many will be made righteous.” *Righteous* carries the meaning of “right standing” with God.

When Jesus died on the cross for sins, He proved He had the authority to lay down His life on behalf of mankind. Three days later, Jesus was raised to life and walked out of the tomb. This miraculous event validated His victory over the death penalty for all who trust His work on the cross. Ephesians 2:8-9 explains receiving forgiveness with God based on faith in Christ: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so no one can boast.”

### **Why do we feel like we can earn a relationship with God through our own efforts?**

Our relationship with God is restored when we come to know Him through trust in Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9 states, “. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.”



**Have you come to a place of receiving God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ? If you have, share a brief summary with the group as you feel comfortable.**

**If you have yet to embrace God's love and forgiveness in Christ, take a moment to think through who can help you with next steps.**

Relationships matter in our stories. A relationship with God through Jesus Christ represents the vital core for knowing the Author who designs the days and hours of our lives for a purpose. He is able to bring good out of the pain we experience in relationships. He also generates great blessing as we know Him better through others and continue to become more like Him in the way we love those around us.

**Take a minute and read Elise's\* story, *My Childhood Chaos*, below. Consider how relationships with God, other people, and herself made a difference.**

My parents divorced when I was six and I have no memory of them together. My mom who had been a stay-at-home mom was suddenly a single working parent. It was a very big change for a very little girl. Both of my parents remarried within a year. This was a very confusing time, full of different people entering my life. My mom remarried a very unstable, abusive man. She felt like her decision would give us stability; instead it brought more chaos.

My mom couldn't handle my sister and sent her off to live with my dad and stepmom. In the midst of the first 18 months, my stepfather sexually abused me. My memories of that time are hazy. I knew enough to know that something was very wrong with what he was doing. It made me feel very strange and uncomfortable. My mom and stepdad fought a lot. There was a lot of yelling. I think he left a time or two and came back. No one really liked him, but my mom stayed.

I finally told my mom about the abuse a few years later. Unfortunately, her answer was to sit me down with both of them and ask me if I wanted my stepdad to leave. As a child then, and an adult now, I wished she had booted him straight out of the house. I was a timid child and couldn't turn out a grown man crying in front of me. So he stayed. And my issues and the past were swept under the rug.

During all of this chaos at my mom's house, my dad and stepmom were such solid parents. They had a happy, warm home. The contrast created more confusion about my mom's house. Why hadn't she stood up for me? Why was she still with him? Did it even happen? My yucky feelings about my memories continued for a long time.

*\*The author's name is a pseudonym.*

I eventually told my dad and stepmom in college. It was very hard for me. No one had ever believed me. They immediately took care of me in all the ways that I had hoped someone would. It was very validating. My mom finally divorced my stepfather. And life moved on until I became a mom which brought up a lot of emotions again. It seems to me that we judge our parents as confused children, young adults, and parents one day.

I was a new Christian when I went through those feelings again as a parent. I talked with my mom, asking some very hard questions. She asked for my forgiveness. I even called my stepfather hoping for validation, but he wouldn't confirm anything. I went to therapy and worked through a lot of confusing emotions. I went to church where I learned so much. All of those things helped me move forward and heal.

These are my thoughts as I reflect on what happened: I am tremendously grateful for such a good example in my dad and stepmom. I needed a model of stability and love. I would remind another woman who has been violated of the importance of telling someone what happened. It is horrible to feel alone, weird, and sad. We all need to be heard and validated. Words are powerful and when I said them out loud, it released something inside of me.

I can't change what happened to me, but I can change how I react. We can help each other by sharing our experiences. I grow a little every time I hear someone's story. My faith has been tremendous in healing my heart. I didn't have Christ in my life when these things happened to me, but God had a plan for me. He is a parent who will NEVER let me down! He is good and bigger than all of the sin in this world. Some bad things happened to me as a child, but there is real HOPE in Christ. He stands before me and I'm new. There is more than this broken world we live in and I'm so grateful for that!

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

*For Reflection:*

**How did Elise experience the positive and negative impact of relationships?**

**How does her faith change her perspective on the harm she suffered?**





— LIVING YOUR STORY —

# Freedom Matters

Freedom is defined as, “Liberation from slavery or restraint or the power of another.” The chapters of our stories include finding freedom from sinful patterns, wrong thinking, and destructive habits. It may be worry, addiction, bitterness, guilt, unhealthy dependency on another person or a host of other possibilities. In this session we reflect upon experiencing release from those things which entangle us.

**When have you witnessed worry, addiction, bitterness, or unhealthy relationships become a prison in someone’s life?**

A typical human response to being trapped is to bargain with God for release. In Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia, he warns believers to avoid the trap of trying to please God by doing “good” or performing religious acts. **Write out Galatians 5:1 below.**

Jesus came to set us free. When we try to gain freedom in our strength Paul says we are living in the flesh. By doing so we spin our wheels without the Lord’s supernatural resources. The apostle Paul describes the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit in verses 5:16-18.

**Read these verses and summarize the battle we face.**



Believers win the battle between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit by depending on the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul calls this walking in the Spirit and explains the contrast between living in the flesh and the Spirit. Read verses 5:19-21 and 5:22-23 and together write the fifteen acts of the flesh on the column on the left and then list the nine fruit of the Spirit on the right.

**Acts of the Flesh**

**Fruit of the Spirit**

**As you look at the two columns, what stands out to you?**

The Spirit produces the fruit of Jesus' life and character as we "keep in step" with Him each day. Read Galatians 2:20 and 5:24 which explain a believer's oneness with the crucifixion of Jesus.

**What does it mean to be crucified with Christ?**

**How does a believer's union with Christ make a difference when confronted with self-centered living and/or sin?**

Read Ephesians 4:30-32. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we live in bondage to sin. Think about a destructive habit, attitude, relational dynamic, or other entanglement in your story.

**How can “counting it crucified with Christ” by faith enable you to live in the Holy Spirit’s victory?**

**Read Ephesians 5:18-21. What command is given concerning the Holy Spirit? And what are the results?**

Filling of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life occurs when he or she yields to His control. Just as faith is required to receive Christ for salvation, faith is also the vehicle for experiencing the filling of the Spirit.

**What does it mean to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit by faith?**

**How is the Holy Spirit working in you through the challenges in your story?**

Freedom matters in our stories. The good news of the Gospel releases a new experience of freedom from those things which entangle us because a relationship with Jesus Christ means we possess the Holy Spirit within us. By acknowledging His presence and depending on His power, we move from a place of defeat to a place of victory.

**Read Laurie’s story *From Insanity to Serenity* describing her courageous journey to find God’s freedom in her story.**

Hi, my name is Laurie, and I’m an alcoholic. That is how I represent myself at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. I’ve learned alcoholism is a disease. It is hereditary. My father’s mother and my mother’s father were both alcoholics. Both my parents were alcoholics who drank at home. To the outside world my family looked

like something off "Leave It to Beaver" or "The Donna Reed Show." This disease affects your mind, body and spirit. I have also learned alcoholism is a symptom of the real problem.

Women can cross that imaginary line from being a "normal" drinker to an alcoholic quickly. That was the case for me. I had all the traits of a garden-variety alcoholic. I always drank to excess in my young adult years. However, when I got married and had my children I only drank socially.

Once I hit my forties, I started drinking more than socially. One thing led to another and I found myself not able to control my drinking. I didn't lose my family, job, house, car, etc. I lost my sanity. All I did was think about what time I got off work, when I could get that next drink, "when, when, when." I stopped going to functions away from my house, because I knew better than to drink and drive; especially since I had had two serious car accidents in my late teens due to drinking and driving.

As an isolated drinker, I had become "just like my mother." The one thing I didn't want. My mother died at 49 from a brain hemorrhage, having passed out while drinking at home. I was only 23 when she died. I didn't want my kids to feel the pain I had felt. After a few years of swearing I'd quit, trying every possible way to stop, I finally broke down and reached out for help.

I called AA. I will always remember the kind young woman I spoke with named Kristy. Her encouragement and helpful information led me to my first meeting on September 4, 2008.

AA is spiritual program. You are asked to believe in a power greater than yourself. Belief in this power will relieve you of your alcoholism. Some folk who have a problem turning their will and their life over to God start out by turning it over to the group first. My higher power is GOD.

I attended church on a fairly regular basis throughout my life. I saw everyone having faith in God and I was always envious. I just had no idea how to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I had never read the bible and didn't know how to carry on a conversation with folks who seemed to know God. I felt stupid and embarrassed. AA taught me how to do all those things; even more so, how to talk to God Himself. I also learned a lot about growing my relationship with Him from people in my church.

Once I turned this over to God, my life became more manageable. I lost the desire to drink. My sobriety date is September 5, 2008. My problems became easier to handle. I used to think in order to pray, you had to say all the "thee's, thou's, etc." I now know I can talk to God, just as simply as I am writing these words. When my day becomes crazy I "let go, and let God" take care of things. I just need to wake up each day and let Him lead me. When I try to be in control, my life gets out of whack. When I let God be in control, I have a calm serene day. I live happy, joyous and free thanks to finding my faith. When I first took steps toward freedom from addiction my faith was but a "tiny mustard seed." Now I have a total mustard forest! I am confident God will be there to guide me through anything life brings me.

*For Reflection:*

**What shifts in Laurie's thinking allowed her to find freedom?**

**How can you "let go, and let God" be in control this week?**









# Obedience Matters

From the time we are young we learn the difference between right and wrong. Parents show us what it means to abide by rules and why it is important to obey. Sometimes it is a matter of our safety and protection. Other times it is teaching us the proper way to relate with others. In this session, we will look at why obedience in our stories is more than a list of rules to follow.

**What are your first memories of learning the difference between right and wrong? What were the consequences you faced which helped enforce the rules?**

**Growing up, did your temperament tend toward more of a "rule-follower" naturally or did you have more of a rebellious nature?**

Read Exodus 20:1-17. Like our parents, God has a list of "rules" or laws in the Bible He wants us to follow. God has given us many commands in Scripture. The most well known commands are the original 10 commandments God gave the Israelites through Moses.

**List the first four commandments which relate to God.**

**List the next six commandments which relate to others.**

God gives us commands and laws for our benefit. They provide order, protection and parameters that show us right from wrong; however, obedience to God's commands should be a reflection of our love for God, not an attempt to earn His favor.

If you are a child of God... If you are child of God and have accepted Jesus as your Savior, there is peace found in knowing we cannot earn salvation through abiding by a list of rules. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). There is nothing we can do to earn love, acceptance, or even blessings from God; however, the Lord does desire obedience in His children.

**What is our motivation for obeying God if we don't have to earn our way to heaven?**

Read the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:1-18. Isaac was the long-awaited child for whom Sarah and Abraham had prayed. He was the first-born son of the chosen people God had promised.

**What did God call Abraham to do?**

**How would Sarah have felt watching her husband and teenage son walking away?**

Our trust is often tested when obedience to God goes against our logic, desires, and emotions. Like in the life of Job, God doesn't always explain Himself in times of testing. We are often called to believe in His goodness and perfect sovereignty, even painfully surrendering what we think we want most of all.

**What enabled Abraham to trust God and obey Him in this situation?**

**How did God provide?**

In verse 14 Abraham declares God as His provider.

**How has God's past provision in your story increased your faith? Describe a specific example.**

We often forget the many ways the Lord answers prayer. Consider journaling as a tool to recall God's faithfulness for yourself as well as for the purpose of passing on to others.

**What can we learn about obedience from Abraham and Isaac's story?**

While difficult to see some times, obeying God always results in blessing. While the blessing may look different than expected, we never lose when we follow God's will and commands.

**Read Deuteronomy 28:1-13 and list all the blessings God promised Israel if they chose obedience.**

Obedience is hard sometimes especially when the world says the opposite of what we read in Scripture. It is counter-cultural to remain sexually pure before marriage, forgive a friend who has hurt you deeply or give thanks to God in even the hardest of situations. Think back over the different chapters of your life.

**What are some examples in your own life of obeying God and the blessings that resulted?**

**What have been the consequences you have faced when you've chosen disobedience?**



## **What tempts us to go against God's Word and His plan?**

Obedience matters in our stories. Tim Keller a pastor of a large church in New York City explains the good news of the Gospel: we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope. In ourselves we are sinful and rebellious and want our own way BUT God's desire for a life of obedience is grounded and covered in His unconditional love for us. Not because He is a harsh taskmaster who but a loving Father who wants to give us His very best and show us again and again that following Him is the way to true life.

**Read Stacy's\* story *When God Called Me to Stay* and think about how obedience affected her life and those around her.**

How often do we pray for God to change our situation? We land somewhere outside of our comfort zone and pray that God will take away our pain and that He will lead us down a better path. For me, it was 1986; I had been out of college for just under two years and was working in the technical recruiting industry in the Dallas area. The company that I was working for was expanding and I was offered a promotion to move to the Houston office. They had a Houston team in place but told me that there were a "few issues in the Houston office."

Immediately after arriving in Houston I began to see how difficult this situation was going to be. The first issue was that Houston was suffering very high unemployment of over 9 %. This was of course more than a small problem in the recruiting business. My biggest struggle though was not the unemployment rate but the other employees in our Houston office. Not only were none Christians, they also ridiculed me for my faith. The other managers in Houston told me I "stuck out like a sore thumb". My supervisor in Houston would come in to my office and write that our new name was going to be called the "Christian Staffing Center" and laugh.

This was an unbearable situation and I started to pray for God to show me the open door to a new situation. But the more I prayed the more God told me to stay. I couldn't believe it; I really thought that I needed to remove myself from this job. It was not only the team and the teasing but more importantly my immediate boss was pushing me constantly to do things I felt were unethical. Truly a situation where I could have felt justified walking out of, but I really wanted God's direction and He was saying to stay.

God's message to me at that time was one simple message; He was calling me to stay. The message from Philippians 4:6-7 was what I felt God was telling me. "Do not be anxious about anything ... And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I felt he was calling me to be a Christian in business and he wanted me to live my faith 7 days a week-not just on Sunday's. If I would do that for Him then I felt that God was prom-

ising me His peace. My fiancé and I (now my husband) discussed this and prayed. My words prayed for “God’s will in my life” but I know my heart prayed for change and for God to call me to a new situation. Yet, when He called me to stay-I obeyed.

That first year in Houston was so difficult, I struggled with fears that I would be fired for taking the stands that I took and also my own personal desire to quit. However, in small ways whenever I needed encouragement, God was there with me encouraging me and offering his perfect peace. I would see Him in the workplace. Sometimes it was in a coworker asking for advice, or other managers thanking me for taking the tough stands that I took. Even in my immediate manager that so ridiculed me when I came to Houston, I started seeing small signs of God’s work in her life.

God ended up keeping me there for over 20 years, our Houston office was slowly transformed. My boss became my friend and my sister in Christ. The change in our Houston organization was nothing short of miraculous. It was so amazing to see God’s hand at work. God’s lesson has stayed with me through my adult life; He has showed me that although my situation may not be easy, when I seek His will, I will have His peace. With God’s peace all things are possible.

wake up each day and let Him lead me. When I try to be in control, my life gets out of whack. When I let God be in control, I have a calm serene day. I live happy, joyous and free thanks to finding my faith. When I first took steps toward freedom from addiction my faith was but a “tiny mustard seed.” Now I have a total mustard forest! I am confident God will be there to guide me through anything life brings me.

*\*The author’s name is a pseudonym.*

*For Reflection:*

**How did Stacy work through her desires vs. what she felt like God wanted her to do?**

**How does her story encourage you to obey the Lord?**





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LIVING YOUR STORY

# Transformation Matters

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# Transformation Matters

One thing in life remains certain: we always face change as a part of our stories. Changes occur in ourselves and others through evolving circumstances, interactions, and emotions. In this session, we reflect on being transformed on the inside as the chapters of our stories unfold with the unexpected.

**What kind of uncertainty are you currently experiencing in your story?**

Let's begin by looking at an example from Scripture of women who faced uncertainty. As background, a woman named Naomi and her husband Elimelech live among God's people in the land of Judah. They encounter a severe famine and as a result of the lack of food, they relocate with their two sons to the land of Moab where idols are worshiped. During their ten-year stay, Elimelech dies and then both of Naomi's sons marry Moabite women. Sadly, her two sons die also. At this point, Naomi decides to return to Judah because she hears the famine ended; her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, volunteer to accompany her. This is where we pick up the narrative in Ruth 1:6-22. Read the passage and consider the following.

**How does Naomi counsel her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah to deal with the unexpected loss (vs.11-12)?**

**How does Naomi interpret her circumstances (vs. 13, 20-21)?**



Ruth and Naomi found themselves in the midst of both external and internal change. External change represented by the loss of their husbands and thus, the source of security in ancient culture. Internal transformation for Ruth takes the form of how to respond to Naomi's plea to return to Moab and Naomi faces the challenge of how to think about God while processing so much loss.

**How do Ruth and Orpah respond to Naomi's counsel?**

**Read verses 15-18. What does Ruth's response to Naomi reveal?**

Difficult circumstances in the form of loss in these women's stories result in grief, compounded by the struggle with how to walk through the unknown.

**What emotions have you experienced during a time of insecurity?**

**What does our tendency to resist the unknown show us about our hearts?**

Unwelcome circumstances create space to know God more deeply. Our responses cultivate or close the space to know God better.

**What are some ways to cultivate our relationship with God?**

Unexpected situations present an opportunity to grow personally and spiritually. Through meditating on Scripture, prayer, and seeking out support and resources we can be transformed. On the flip side, just like Ruth and Naomi's culture offered a solution, the "world system" which the Bible says is under the control of the evil one tempts us to follow its solution when faced with insecurity. Read I John 2:15-17.

**How can a time of uncertainty become a breeding ground for “the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life?”**

Our spiritual enemy wants to tempt us to panic and seek for a solution outside of God’s guidance. We can resist the temptation to do so by affirming the Lord’s power to lead and provide. Read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. In this chapter, Paul explains how the transformed lives of those in Corinth are evidence of God’s truth in Christ.

**As a reminder from our session about freedom, who is the Holy Spirit (vs. 17)?**

**How does He guide us?**

**Why does cooperation with the Holy Spirit transform a believer’s life (vs. 18)?**

Changing circumstances in our story offer the opportunity to become more Christ-like.

**How can you have a Spirit led approach to uncertainty in your current story?**

When something shifts in a woman’s story, her response can also affect other people positively or negatively. Reading the entire book of Ruth is a treasure to be stored up when you are able. For our purposes, compare Naomi’s words in 1:20-21 to what God accomplished for her and Ruth in 4:13-17.

**How did those around her see God’s hand?**

## **How does your response to uncertainty affect the people around you?**

Transformation matters in our stories. Because change is a constant theme, we can learn to respond to uncertainty in faith instead of react out of insecurity and pride. By clinging to the Lord and trusting His hand upon our circumstances we will find Him faithful every time. God uses the changes we encounter to mold our character and influence those around us.

## **As you read Joye's story *Finding My Security*, reflect upon her response to change in her life.**

My husband, Don, and I met and married in San Diego, CA in 1971. After our wedding, we moved to his small hometown of Borger in the Texas Panhandle so that he could join his Dad in the road construction business. We lived lifestyles that reflected the world like partying, drinking, not attending church. I spent my days as an elementary teacher.

Two years into our marriage the thirteen year old daughter of some dear friends of ours died when a car hit her on her bicycle. We grieved with the family at this tragic loss, but did not know how to comfort them. We were amazed as we witnessed their faith. They were committed Christians and immediately clung to the truth that they knew their daughter was in heaven and that they would see her again someday. This "Good News" they talked of was new news to Don and me, so out of curiosity, we decided to visit their church. After the first Sunday, we were intrigued by what the pastor was teaching from the book of Romans and continued to attend each Sunday. Three months later the Holy Spirit had softened our hearts and both Don and I prayed to receive Christ as our Savior.

I had looked for love in a lot of wrong places through my teenage and young adult life. I came to realize that the love relationship I wanted and needed was Jesus! A peace settled deep into my heart as the Holy Spirit came into my life and I rejoiced in the firm promise of heaven someday. Soon Don and I were blessed with two boys, Bryan and Timothy, three years apart, and ultimately we adopted our babysitter, Dena, at the age of 18 who was being raised by her elderly grandparents. We became very active in a small Bible-centered church where we studied and diligently applied God's Word to our lives. I ultimately developed a women's ministry and Don joined the elder board. God had captured our hearts and we offered all of our lives to be used by Him.

In 1987, I marked Ps 73:25-26 in my Bible: Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (NASB) Through those words, God impressed upon me that I could not be certain of anything or anyone on earth. My security needed to be in Him and Him alone. That truth motivated

me to study the Bible more deeply and allowed it to transform my mind. I became convinced that God loves me, He is good, and He is sovereignly in control of all that happens in life.

Those truths burrowed deep into my mind and heart and prepared me for March 29, 1989. After eighteen years of marriage, I received news that my beloved husband had died instantly in a car accident. In the midst of my shock and disbelief, my mind was flooded with the truths I had earlier learned: God is good, He loves me, and there are no "accidents" with Him. As I chose to embrace these truths and accept my Heavenly Father's will, the Holy Spirit ministered to my hurting, wounded heart, much as Jesus was comforted in the Garden as He reluctantly, yet willingly, yielded to His Father's plan (Lk 22:41-43).

Two days after Don's death, I read Ps 27:13-14: I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take course; yes, wait for the Lord. Those words encouraged me to trust deeply in God. He faithfully provided for me and my children during that painful, difficult time through unexpected financial provision, support of family and friends, and strength to face each new day without a father and husband in the family. God proved even more how much He loved me and cared for my every need as I continued to trust in His goodness.

More than two decades later I thank God that all of my children are committed Christians and that I have the unexpected privilege to serve on the faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary. God has transformed my pain and loss into an amazing opportunity to share His love and truth to those training for Christian ministry. I remain confident in God's abiding presence which allows me to enjoy an inner peace as I wait expectantly for the unfolding of His perfect will in the years ahead.

*For Reflection:*

**How did Joye allow her loss to transform her? How did her decision affect others?**

**What are examples of the solutions the world offers to deal with uncertainty?**







# Surrender Matters

Surrender calls to mind a great battle scene where one army advances against another. At some point, it becomes evident to the weaker army that they will indeed be overtaken and defeated. They fly the white flag of surrender attempting to salvage the remainder of their troop and their own lives. Surrender implies a “giving up” or “giving in” after a struggle. In this session we will explore the necessity of relinquishing the authorship of our story.

**What comes to mind when you think about the word *surrender*?**

Read 1 John 1:8-2:2.

**What must we recognize about ourselves before we can truly surrender to the cross?**

**What comfort do you find in these verses?**

When we understand that we are desperate sinners, we see our brokenness, depravity and utter dependence on Him for life. C.S. Lewis said, “Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”

**How does sin make us all rebellious towards God?**

**Read Luke 7:36-50. What did the woman have to surrender in order to come to Jesus?**

**What stands out to you about how she interacted with Him?**

**How did her loving act demonstrate what she believed about Him?**

**How did the Pharisees view her and what she did for Jesus?**

We cannot surrender to Jesus without true humility. Humility requires us to take a proper view of ourselves as sinners and understand we are nothing without Him. Jesus' greatest demonstration of humility came when he subjected Himself to the Cross and all the suffering that went with it. All for us! Read Psalm 51:17.

**Contrast the attitudes of the woman who anointed Jesus and the Pharisees.**

Do you believe in God's ultimate authority over all of your life? For instance, His will for where you live and work, your marital status, whether or not you have children or even the number of children He might give you, etc.

**What are some areas that you hold on to, even subconsciously, where you would rather call the shots?**

**What are your fears about submitting those areas to the Lord?**

The truth is, we were never made to rule our lives. Believing that God's ways are better results in peace and ultimately joy.

**What does Isaiah 55:8-9 remind us about His perfect will?**

**How do the following verses encourage you?**

**John 10:10**

**Ephesians 3:20-21**

Surrender matters in our stories. When we come to terms with our tendency to make our stories about us, we can give over our understanding of how things ought to go. We find a place of peace by believing God's character and living for His glory in every chapter.

**Read Jennifer's moving story *My Desire Became Consuming*, and consider her journey of surrender.**

My husband and I went through three years of infertility before our twin boys were born. Before they turned a year, we started infertility treatments because we both strongly wanted more children. After two pregnancies resulting in miscarriages, we decided to stop the treatments for a while and give my body and heart time to heal.

Then seven months later I became pregnant again. It was a shock to both of us! We found out on Mother's Day, which was such a gift from the Lord. But at my seventeen-week appointment, we found out that our baby had died just a few days before. I can't begin to describe my heartache. Samuel David was delivered on Aug. 10th, 2011.

I can't really remember the days after his funeral. But my God, my God...He enveloped us with His peace. I remember one morning as I lay in bed, I didn't want to do anything and I prayed to the Lord and asked Him to help me. In a gentle whisper I heard, Stand, all you need to do is stand. So I did. I needed to stand physically and spiritually in His truth. He loves me, He has never left me, He is for me and He is good.

Six months after losing Samuel, I became unexpectedly pregnant again and miscarried around five weeks. Then five months later I had an ectopic pregnancy and miscarried. I soon went to the crazy place. Why was this happening? Haven't I been through enough pain? What is it that God wants me to learn? I just want another baby...why is this so hard? Doubt and lies from the evil one penetrated my heart. I felt unreachable by God and so alone.

I saw a reproductive endocrinologist who ran test after test and basically told me that my eggs were old and there weren't many left. It was possible I could become pregnant again but it could take years.

I felt the walls of my heart going up and kept God at an arm's length because He was responsible for my pain. I started walking in offense. God had offended me. I wanted to protect my heart from the One who caused the pain. Even though He had been the One who created these miracle babies, I was too focused on what He hadn't done for me.

I started looking on the internet for how to increase pregnancy in your late 30s and how to decrease your chance of miscarriages. I wanted to be in control. In December, my husband lovingly told me that my desire to have more children had become an idol. He asked if I had surrendered this to the Lord and I said yes. He then said he didn't see any peace in me regarding this. I didn't know how to respond. We prayed about it and I knew it wasn't surrendered.

A week or so later I was talking to a dear friend who told me how the Lord asked her to tangibly surrender a desire she had. I felt the Lord asking me to do the same thing. Shortly after, my husband and I had the day together. I told him that I wanted to visit the cemetery where Samuel was buried. I grabbed a sticky note and wrote Georgia Ann... my baby girl name.

Looking at Samuel's headstone, I knelt down. I knew God was asking me to place the sticky note on Samuel's headstone, completely surrendering my baby girl and any other babies. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done because in my mind I thought if I truly give this over, and He chooses not to give us any more children...will my Jesus be enough? The answer was yes. I then let go of that sticky note. But it wasn't just a sticky note...it was my heart, my dreams, my babies. They were all His now.

I didn't want to get up. My husband just held me as I cried and cried. But eventually we did get up and a peace came over me like none other. I finally felt free from the bondage of the very thing I wanted so badly. I had turned my desire into an idol, making me captive to it. Psalm 118:5 says, "In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free." I'm now walking in freedom and fully know that my Jesus is enough.

*For Reflection:*

**What process did Jennifer go through to arrive at peace about surrendering her desire?**

**No matter what you want God to do for you, how can you draw strength from Jennifer's journey?**

*\*As an update, Jennifer and her husband welcomed Georgia Ann Lacey into their family through the adoption process. They are praising God for all that He has done!*





LIVING YOUR STORY



# Leader Guidelines

# SACRED STORY



# Leader Guidelines

**We are so excited you have decided to lead a group through this 5 week study!**

You may be a seasoned leader and feel like you have a handle on the process; or you may be leading a group for the first time and feel like you are shaking in your boots. Either way, we want to offer resources as needed. Here are a few tips to help you make the most of your group time.

1. The ideal group size is 6-8 people including leader(s). Fewer is certainly okay! More than 8 may make it challenging for good discussion.
2. Consider leading the Bible study with a friend. One can host and the other can facilitate discussion, or you can take turns leading.
3. The study is designed ideally for an hour and a half discussion. If you are leading a morning or lunch-time group, it is possible to cover the material in an hour if time is short.
4. There are two options for your group. Either you can opt for the “no homework” approach which means that the time you spend together is used working through the questions as you go, looking up the verses and discussing each question. The other approach is for members to do the lesson ahead of time on their own and then spend the group time sharing what is learned. Either approach can work. Make the best decision based on your group’s needs and background and what seems most comfortable.
5. Consider inviting women who you have regular contact with whether in your neighborhood, apartment complex, or work place. If you have a high school group or college friends you also see on a regular basis this is a great option as well.

6. Send out an email inviting them to your study. Keep it simple! Here is a sample.

Subject line: "Does your story count?" or "How can you live your story?"

*"Hi Friends,*

*Sally and I would like to invite you to my home for a five-week Bible study called Living your Story. We would love for you to be a part! The study covers several relevant topics: relationships, freedom, surrender, obedience and change. It doesn't matter if you have never been in a Bible study. We just want you to come! We will start in two weeks on \_\_\_\_\_ and meet from 7:30-9:00.*

*We will get back to you with more details. Have a good week!"*

7. Plan on easy refreshments. Nothing too complicated!
8. Open and close with prayer. You and your co-leader can do this. As the study progresses you can ask if someone would like to volunteer to open or close.
9. Be sure to build in time to read through the story silently as a group at the end of the material. We have found women are greatly encouraged by hearing from others through a personal story as it reinforces the theme of the study. Then review the questions together to end your session.
10. Pray weekly for your group members. Pray that their eyes are open to the truth of the Gospel and that lives are changed.
11. We would love to see the faces of those who are doing the study! Please take a photo of your group at some point and email it to [contact@sacredstoryministries.org](mailto:contact@sacredstoryministries.org).
12. Upon completion of the study, we would love to have your feedback. We will email you a short questionnaire.

**Thank you for launching a study. We are praying for you and anticipate the Lord doing great things in your group!**

**Sacred Story Ministries**

