

Gospel

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Published by Witherspoon Press, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, Kentucky.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

presbyterianmission.org/ministries/curriculum/witherspoon-press/

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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_IDV2bgM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQi_IDV2bgM).

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* seeks 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

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, that I desired you, that I waited for you day after day, that I longed to hear the sound of your voice?"

What conversations do you continue to have with the past?

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, teaching, 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.

*Whatever your story is,
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.