

**Hope Community Group Stories Curriculum (Year 2)**  
**(Participants Version, CG Stories Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4)**

What We're Going to Discuss...

1. Why Do We Tell and Listen to Personal Stories?
  2. How Do We Tell Our Own Personal Story?
  3. How Do We Listen to Another's Personal Story?
  4. Case Studies in Telling and Listening to Stories
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**1. Why Do We Tell and Listen to Personal Stories?**

"Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

The Human Desire

- Have you ever found yourself thinking or saying something like this about church (or family or friends: "I wish we went deeper with each other" or "I just want community"?
- A wish or complaint can be a way of asking for something without being vulnerable
- One possible answer is to know and be known, to love and be loved as we truly are

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and fully loved is, well, a lot like being [known and] loved by God. It is what need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us and strengthens us for any difficulty life can throw at us." (Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*)

The Biblical Reality: God Is at Work in Our Personal Histories

- The Bible is one big story of God: Creation (it was all good), Fall (it went bad), Redemption (it is being healed), Consummation (it will be all better one day)
- The Bible is one big story of God in Jesus: Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection, Ascension
- The Bible is also a collection of very personal stories about different historical people who experience this God

## 2. How Do We Tell Our Own Personal Story?

“My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours... it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us more powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.” (Frederick Buechner, Telling Secrets)

Some Guidelines to Prepare to Share Your Story...

As you think through your story, try to keep this question in mind:  
What is God revealing about Himself and His character through my story?

Try to limit your time to 20 or so minutes.  
(This will allow space for people to ask you follow up questions and pray for you)

Try to speak honestly about the harm and goodness in your story.  
(This often looks like getting specific with sensory details- sight, smell, taste, sound, touch- and avoiding Christian cliches about scenes or people.)

A little preparation goes a long way in making your story clearer and more powerful.  
(So, spend some time praying with God about your story, possibly writing it out, and “rehearsing” your story to yourself or someone else. When it comes time to share, feel free to bring some thoughts in a bullet points format, but try to avoid reading word for word if possible. Seeing and being seen by your group members is much of what makes sharing stories powerful)

Try to hit on the following topics:

- What did it feel like to grow up in your home?  
(E.g. Birth order, your role in the family, the unwritten rules in your family)
- If you became a Christian as a child, how did your faith change in college or as an adult?  
(And please tell how you came to Christ.)
- Hit on a couple of events in your life that you feel shaped how you view the world, how you view God, and how you relate to others.
- What are a couple of key relationships in your life and how have they affected you?
- Notice and name a few themes that you see the Lord bringing you back to along your journey.  
(The lies you tend to believe, struggles, gospel truths He brings and you need to remember.)

### 3. How Do We Listen to Another's Personal Story?

"Stories are our vast democracy. We all have them. We all need them. They cross all boundaries...[We need to] share one another's stories and walk in one another's shoes. To have a responsibility for someone else's life- if even for just a moment...The key to transformation lies in sharing: when you hear someone else's story deep enough to inhabit it and retell it as if you've lived it, you become 'the other' and see the world through his or her eyes." (Novelist Colum McCann, in an interview)

Some Guidelines to Prepare to Receive Other People's Stories...

As you listen to someone else's story, you are trying to come alongside someone in safety.

- Try to hear them with your undivided attention: give them the gift of your presence. (We show this to the sharer by putting potential distractions aside, leaning in or sitting relaxed and close enough to hear, and making affirming eye-contact with the listener.)
- Try to hear them with compassion: try to feel what they are feeling, not fix it or ignore it. (Mentally and emotionally put yourself in that situation and in their shoes, and listen for strong emotional words that express pain, shame, longing, vulnerability, or strength).
- Try to hear them with curiosity: allow yourself to want to know more about what happened. (Again, this begins with imagining yourself in their situation, but continues with a desire to know themes and details- who, what, when, where, why- combined with generously giving space and time to the speaker for self-discovery and meeting with Jesus- even in the sharing.)
- To listen well- with presence, compassion, and curiosity, it will help to quietly notice and name to ourselves and God (not to shame) what comes up within us when we're listening to someone else's story: fear, anger, sadness, envy, thankfulness, joy, etc. Then keep breathing.

When you respond to someone else's story, you are trying to communicate that it is safe to feel vulnerable and it is healing to tell (and hear) the truth.

- You can ask follow-up questions that show curiosity and compassion (At an appropriate time, like the end you can ask something such as "would you say more about \_\_\_?" or "what was that experience like for you?" or "what did you say you felt in that situation?" or "how would you describe that relationship today?")
- You can pray for the person and his or her story at the end. (After some time for questions and comments, you can ask the person if you and/or a few others can pray for them. Feel free to ask the person who shared what they would like prayer for in their story or even in their life right now.)
- You can make affirming comments that show understanding and compassion. (At appropriate times, like during long pauses or at the end you can say something such as

“that’s so hard” or “ugh” or “I hate that” or “wow, that’s so exciting” or “what a gift” or “thanks so much for sharing that. that took so much courage.”)

- Saying something more specific or speaking into someone’s story is challenging. A few best practices are: (1) describe a situation or response using their own words, (2) speak in a way that is from your heart, and (3) try not to give advice, make the story about you, or paper over difficult situations- for instance, by changing the subject or quoting a Bible lesson.

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#### 4. Case Studies

“The [Christian] writer will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that [human life] has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for.” (Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery & Manners*)

“Case Studies” (or How Do the Bible and Christians Tell Stories?)

##### Case Study 1: Jesus of Nazareth’s Story

Jesus’ life story is told four different times in the New Testament books called “The Gospels” (The Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.) The gospel is a message, which is really just a story: the story of Jesus.

- Pick a Gospel Book to look at together: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.
- Now count the number of chapters dedicated to Jesus’ birth/childhood, then his adult life, and then his death/resurrection. Feel free to use the section titles in your Bible.

##### Case Study 2: Paul of Tarsus’ Story

The story of Paul of Tarsus’ 1<sup>st</sup> encounter with God is told three different times in the Book of Acts (Chapters 9, 22, and 26). Paul himself tells his story twice (in Acts 22 and 26). Let’s look together at how Paul tells his own story in two different situations.

- Exercise 1: Compare and contrast the 2 beginnings of Paul’s story: Acts 22:1-5, 26:2-11
- Exercise 2: Compare and contrast the 2 endings of Paul’s story: Acts 22:17-23, 26:19-31

##### Case Study 3: Henri Nouwen’s Story

In the beginning of his book *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen honestly tells the story behind a pivotal decision in his later life:

After twenty years in the academic world as a teacher of pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, and Christian spirituality, I began to experience a deep inner threat. As I entered into my fifties and was able to realize the unlikelihood of doubling my years, I came face to face with the simple question, “Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus?” After twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues. Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger. I began to ask myself whether my lack of contemplative prayer, my loneliness, and my constantly changing involvement in what seemed most urgent were signs that the Spirit was gradually being suppressed. It was very hard for me to see clearly, and though I never spoke

about hell or only jokingly so, I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term “burnout” was a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death.

In the midst of this I kept praying, “Lord, show me where you want me to go and I will follow you, but please be clear and unambiguous about it!” Well, God was. In the person of Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche [“Larsh”] communities for mentally handicapped people, God said, “Go and live among the poor in spirit, and they will heal you.” The call was so clear and distinct that I had no choice but to follow.

So I moved from Harvard to L’Arche, from the best and brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society. It was a very hard and painful move and I am still in the process of making it. After twenty years of being free to go where I wanted and to discuss what I chose, the small, hidden life with people whose broken minds and bodies demand a strict daily routine in which words are the least requirement does not immediately appear as the solution for spiritual burnout. And yet, my new life at L’Arche is offering me new words to use in speaking about Christian leadership in the future because I have found there all the challenges that we are facing as ministers of God’s word.

So I will offer you some images from my life with people with a mental handicap. I hope that they will give you some inkling of the direction to take when wondering about Christian leadership in the future. (*In the Name of Jesus*, pages 19-23)