

Hope Community Group Stories Curriculum (Year 2)
(Leader's Notes, 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

Leaders Notes for Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4:

(1) The Stories Unit is typically done in Year 2 of a Hope Community Group. It often needs some time of shared relationship (Year 1) and often serves to deepen the relationships (for Year 3). You may need to gauge how ready your community group is in terms of relational engagement and their commitment to regularly attend the group.

(2) You will likely need to set expectations for Stories **a few times**.

- You will need to explain some ground rules: for instance, how important it is to show up regularly, risk personal honesty (for yourself), honor other people's honesty (for others), and not talk about what was shared outside of the community group.
- You will need to explain why we set aside up to a year of time sharing our stories in Community Group: primarily, for the experience telling your personal story and it being received and held well. (This should off-set the pressure to "entertain" an audience and enable people not sharing to be able to miss the group on occasion, which is inevitable.)

(3) You should feel free to use this study to fit the needs of your group.

For instance, you can combine them into one study/week (e.g. Study 2 + 3 with Stand-Alone Handout), two, three, or even four different studies/weeks. This will depend on...

- Your group's familiarity with and skepticism of sharing their personal story or testimony
- Whether you choose to go through all the questions and/or use the case studies
- How long it takes for your group to work through content (e.g. how big or talkative is CG)

(4) Questions for leaders to ask the group are italicized in the below studies. The bullet point questions that are indented-to-the-right and below are meant as follow-up questions for the main questions. Use the follow up questions if the main question is too difficult or too easy, or to take the conversation deeper. Note: there are likely more follow-up questions than a healthy discussion can handle. So (as a leader) be selective, and make sure to save time for prayer.

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*)

Leaders Notes, Study 1: Depending on how many studies you want to spend preparing your group for stories, you may want to just have your group read aloud through the participant copy handout and use the questions included here (in the leader copy) selectively.

Icebreaker: *Not including the Bible, what is the greatest story ever told?*

Why do you think Hope Community Groups focus on sharing our personal stories?

- *What have you experienced or heard about “stories” in Hope Community Groups?*

Have you ever shared story? (If so, how did it go?)

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”?
 - *How have you said this thought?*
 - *What likely made you think or say this?*
- A wish or complaint can be a way of asking for something without being vulnerable; therefore, *what are we asking for when complain about our friendships or community?*
- 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*)

How do stories help us know someone else better?

How do stories let others know us more deeply?

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)
 - *Which of these “stages” of the world’s story feels least familiar? How so?*
 - *Which of these “stages” of the world’s story feels most familiar? How so?*

- The Bible is one big story of God in Jesus: Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection, Ascension
 - *Which of these “stages” of Jesus’ story feels most relatable? Why?*
 - *Which of these “stages” of Jesus’ story feels least relatable? Why?*

- The Bible is also a collection of very personal stories about different historical people who experience this God
 - *Is there a person’s story in the Bible that you relate to most?*
 - *Why does that person’s story feel so impactful to you?*

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)

Leaders Notes, Study 2:

(1) For some people, it might help to write out their story beforehand- word for word or in bullet points. This can help them make their story more focused, clear, and powerful. If they do write their story word-for-word, just encourage them to speak instead of read their story.

(2) Decide whether couples will share as individuals or together and whether you want more than one person or couple to share per meeting time.

- This can depend on the size of your group, how many couples or singles there are, and how long you all want to spend sharing stories.

(3) Pick a leader to share first. Ideally, this leader has already deeply shared his or her story or is very self-aware of their own influences and upbringing.

- This models for the group how to share a story- length, depth, themes, etc.

(4) Based on (2) and (3), share a sign-up with the group- on paper and/or electronically. This will help people pick a date that works best for them when they can share. You might want to ask more experienced story sharers to go earlier on.

Icebreaker: *Who is your favorite storyteller and why? (It could be an author, screen/song-writer, director, friend, or family member.)*

The “How” of Sharing Your Story in Community Group

- *What do you think makes your favorite storyteller so good at it?*
- *Why does it matter how we tell our stories?*
- *What elements matter in telling our personal stories well?*
 - *How does the level of honesty affect the storyteller? Our listeners?*
 - *For instance, how does being more honest about goodness and harm affect the storyteller? How does it affect our listeners?*
 - *How does giving more details about a scene or an important person affect the storyteller? Our listeners?*
 - *How does length and organization affect the storyteller? Our listeners?*
 - *For instance, how does being less organized and overly-long affect the storyteller? And how does it affect our listeners?*
- *How does it affect how we view God to avoid or at least define Christian cliches?*
 - *What are some Christian cliches you’ve heard people say, or you use to avoid vulnerability?*

- *For instance, evaluate what is different between the following phrases:*
 - (1) *“I’m broken” versus “I struggle with disordered eating and here’s how”*
 - (2) *“I have an idol of control” versus “I manipulate conversations so friends never ask me about my family”*
 - (3) *“Jesus redeemed that” versus “Jesus freed me from my need to be a success at work by allowing me to fail publicly in a presentation and still feel his love when I got home, talked about it with my wife, and saw she still loved me all the more.”*

Some Guidelines to Prepare to **Share** Your Story

- *Read over these guidelines out-loud as a group with one reader or by rotating readers*

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.)

Are there any questions about these guidelines?

- *For instance, are there particular words or phrases that stand out or feel confusing?*
- *After reading this, what’s scary about preparing to share your story? What’s exciting?*

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)

Leaders Notes, Study 3:

(1) Your community group may have many people who have a lot of experience in sharing personal stories, or the opposite. Responding well to stories might naturally happen, or it might need to be taught and take some time and leader-interventions. Give appropriate expectations.
(2) Your group may have many people who are intimidated to say anything about another person's story, or need to be a bit more cautious in what they choose to say and when. Again, this will take naming that dynamic and encouraging whatever is needed for sharing to go well.
(3) Pick a leader to share first who is willing to endure people in the group learning how to listen and respond to hearing very personal information.

- This allows for teachable moments on receiving a story- listening, follow up, praying, etc.

Icebreaker: *What's a favorite character from book, movie, or tv show? What did they fight for?*

The "How" of Listening to Another's Story in Community Group

- *What about that favorite character's story do you identify with?*
- *Why does it matter how we listen to another's personal story?*
- *How would you want people to listen to your story? (What things matter to you?)*
 - *How do you show you are paying attention to someone else?*
 - *Why does it matter if someone is paying attention or not? What does it communicate if they are on their phone? looking away or leaning away?*
 - *How do you show someone you care about how their story feels?*
 - *What feels different about sharing when someone else is feeling your pain or joy with you versus angry or shocked by you and about your choices?*
 - *How do you show someone you want to hear more about their story?*
 - *What feels different about sharing when someone else is curious to hear more versus bored or bothered?*
- *Why does it matter what we say in response to another's personal story?*
 - *What do we say to communicate that we are listening?*
 - *How does it feel when someone sincerely says, "that's so tough"?*
 - *How does it feel when someone says, "that's almost like my situation"?*
 - *How does it feel when someone says, "moving on...snack anyone"?*
 - *What do we say to communicate curiosity and compassion to the storyteller?*
 - *How does it feel when someone sincerely says, "tell me more"?*
 - *How does it feel when someone says (immediately after you share), "I think you should have ___" or "you just need to ___"?*

- *What can we say when we don't know what to say in response to a story?*
 - *How does it feel (as the storyteller) when someone sincerely says, "thank you for sharing your story with us"?*
 - *How does it feel (as the storyteller) when people don't say anything and avoid eye-contact?*
 - *How does it feel for someone to ask if they can pray for your story, and then thank God for specific gifts and ask God for specific comforts?*

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

- *Read over these guidelines out-loud as a group with one reader or by rotating readers*

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.

Are there any questions about these guidelines?

- *For instance, are there particular words or phrases that stand out or feel confusing?*
- *After reading this, what’s scary about preparing to share your story? What’s exciting?*

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*)

Leaders Notes, Study 4: Depending on how many weeks you want to spend preparing your group for stories, you may want to just choose one or two of these case studies. It may be hard to do more than two case studies in one meeting time. You can choose which case study/ies to work through based on what you want your group to work on (or confront) ahead of sharing.

- For instance, if you’d like them to talk through *the focus* of their stories, use Case Study 1
- Or if you’d like them to talk through *how to share* their stories for a Community Group audience, use Case Study 2.
- If you’d like them to talk through *how to listen* to another’s story, use Case Study 3.

Icebreaker: *Do you have a favorite story in the Bible or Christian history? What do you like so much about that story?*

“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.
 - *How many chapters are given to each part of Jesus’ life?*
 - *What part of Jesus’ life is being most emphasized?*
 - *Why do you think the Gospel writer is emphasizing that part of Jesus’ life?*

Case Study 2: Paul of Tarsus’ Story

The story of Paul of Tarsus’ 1st 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

- *Ask someone to read aloud Acts 22:1-5.*
 - *Share the context: Paul is grabbed by an angry mob in Jerusalem and arrested by a Roman tribune. Paul asks to speak to the angry people and tells his conversion story (Acts 21:33-40).*
 - *What is Paul saying here in your own words?*
 - *Why do you think he chooses to share his story in this way, to these people?*

- Now ask someone else to read aloud Acts 26:2-11.
 - Share the context: Paul is sent to Roman Governor at Caesarea, and has a chance to defend himself before a mostly indifferent King Agrippa and Queen Bernice (Acts 25:23-26:1).
 - What is Paul saying here in your own words?
 - Why do you think he chooses to share his story in this way, to these people?
- How are the beginnings of these 2 stories similar?
- How are the beginnings of these 2 stories different?
- Why do you think they are different? (Hint: what is their audience and purpose?)

Exercise 2: Compare and contrast the 2 endings of Paul's story

- Ask someone to read aloud Acts 22:17-23
 - In verses 17-21 what is Paul saying in your own words?
 - Why do you think he chooses to share his story in this way, to these people?
 - In verses 22-23 what is the audience's response to Paul's ending?
 - Why do you think they respond this way?
- Now ask someone else to read aloud Acts 26:19-31
 - In verses 19-23 what is Paul saying here in your own words?
 - Why do you think he chooses to share his story in this way, to these people?
 - In verses 24, 28, and 31 what is the audience's response to Paul's ending?
 - Why do you think they respond this way?
- How are the endings of these 2 stories similar?
- How are the endings of these 2 stories different?
- Why do you think they are different? (Hint: what is their audience and purpose?)

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.

- Read the following out-loud as a group. (You can choose one reader or assign a new reader for each paragraph.)

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)

- *What did you do with your body while listening to this story?*
 - *What was your posture during this story?*
 - *What did you find your hands doing?*
 - *What do you guess was the expression on your face?*

- *What emotions did hearing this story make you feel?*
 - *Why do you think you felt that way?*
 - *What did you do with those emotions?*
 - *What did you want to do with those emotions?*

- *What would you want to know more about in Henri Nouwen’s story?*
 - *What is an example of a curious follow-up question you would ask?*
 - *What kind of response do you think asking that question would produce?*

- *What comment would you want to say to Henri Nouwen?*
 - *When in the telling of the story would you want to say that comment?*
 - *What’s something you would say that speaks against the shame in this story?*
 - *What’s something you would say that acknowledges Nouwen’s pain or dignity?*

- *How would you pray for Henri Nouwen at the end of this story?*
 - *What’s one thing you would thank God for?*
 - *What’s one thing you would ask God for?*