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STORY MATTERS

KEY THEMES:

- ☼ Remembering and rehearsing God's story of grace helps us turn away from our sin to trust in God (repentance).
- ☼ Remembering God's amazing grace draws us to live a life of obedience out of our gratitude for his rescue in our lives.

DAY 1

It was early, and I kept the lights low in the kitchen as I began my daily ritual. While the coffee brewed, I grabbed the small sample bottle of anti-inflammatory medication I took to ease body aches. Without looking, I reached in to remove a pill. The cotton felt unusually thick and sticky. I shook the bottle. No rattle. That's when I turned on the light and tried to rouse my sleep-laden eyes to look. What I found did not surprise me as much as it might surprise you. Stuck in the pill bottle instead of cotton was a large, white marshmallow!

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As odd as it was, I guessed pretty quickly what had happened. One of my four children must have found the empty bottle and decided to replace the “marshmallow” that I regularly pulled out of it.

God’s story matters. Your story matters too. But our stories don’t always make much sense to us. Sometimes we can easily figure out an explanation while other times we continue to shake our heads (or our fists) for days at our confusion or disappointment. Psalm 78 shows us how much our story matters by revealing two major characteristics of the biblical narrative.

- First, the Bible as a whole is a very puzzling but absolutely true tale.
- Second, even the simplest stories reveal profound truths.

With these ideas in mind, let’s look at Psalm 78 to understand how much our story matters.

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE: PSALM 78

Background

Genre. A Psalm: from the Hebrew word *tehillim*, which means “praise.” Ironically, over 70 percent of Psalms are actually laments. God wants to hear our full expression of praise, doubt, fear, and hope. He takes all of our emotions and brings them to praise.

Our greatest desire, greater even than the desire for happiness, is that our lives mean something. This desire for meaning is the originating impulse of story. We tell stories because we hope to find or create significant connections between things. Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going.

—Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*

Context. Psalms are Hebrew poems that are meant to be sung in community worship. These weren't just private prayers to God. Hebrew poetry uses a lot of repetition and rhythm, so we may not always get the full effect in English.

Psalm 78: A Story to Remember

Psalm 78 is a long Psalm calling the Israelites to remember the story of God's grace and mercy. It depicts Israel's history as one of forgetfulness and disobedience followed by remembrance and repentance. Set aside ten minutes to read the whole Psalm to get a sense of the redundancy of Israel's cycles of sin and the relentlessness of God's mercy and forgiveness. This pattern offers good news to us today, particularly because Christ the Savior brought an end to the cycle of disobedience and rebellion.

1. Read Psalm 78. Choose a verse you would like to memorize for this particular study. Find one that feels personal to you and your story. Write it here or on a note card or sticky note.

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The following is an outline of Psalm 78 to help you see some of the cycles:

- Part 1: A Call to Remember and Tell (vv. 1-8)
- Part 2: Forgetting His Works and Wonders (vv. 9-16)
- Part 3: Sin and Disbelief (vv. 17-31)
- Part 4: Repentance, False Repentance, and God's Mercy (vv. 32-39)
- Part 5: More Forgetting and Remembering (vv. 40-64)
- Part 6: End of Story: God's Mercy (vv. 65-72)

2. Part 1: Read verses 1-8.

- a. Asaph asks the people to listen to his teaching. What is the content of this teaching (vv. 2-4)? What do the words “hidden lessons” and “parables” suggest to you about the Israelites’ history?

The psalms express every emotion that human beings experience. The laments articulate our fear, despair, shame, and anger. The hymns express joy, love, and confidence. As we read the words of the psalmist, they become our own. They help us understand what is going on inside of us. But even more, they minister to us as they direct us toward God.

—Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*

Day 1

- b. Describe some of the effects rehearsing this history will have (vv. 6-8). How has telling or hearing stories of rescue and redemption impacted you?

3. Part 2: Read verses 9-16.

- a. Name some of the marvels/miracles the Ephraimites forgot (vv. 13-16). What did forgetting lead them to do (vv. 9-11)?

Theological Theme: Repentance

The word *repent* has gotten a bad rap from street preachers who stand on the corner screaming it. But when understood in the context of the grand narrative of Scripture, it becomes an invitation to freedom. Repentance means to turn away from doing things our own way in order to follow God and rest in his provision and plan for our lives. Psalm 78 invites us to think about this true repentance that is found throughout the Bible.

Parts four and five of the psalm tell of God's chosen people raising their fists at him, shouting their unbelief, and turning their backs on his kind provision. God waits patiently for them to turn back toward him, and when they do not, he brings discipline with the purpose of leading them to repentance.

The people initially seem to repent, but verse 36 tells us their repentance only appeared to be sincere. In fact, they were flattering God, or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "They didn't mean a word of it; they lied through their teeth the whole time. They could not have cared less about him, wanted nothing to do with his Covenant." False repentance often involves people working harder to do better in their own effort. It is often motivated by a desire to stay out of trouble and is marked by a goal of keeping the peace.

True repentance comes from the heart. It trusts in our Savior, Jesus Christ, to bring about the change, while it cooperates with God in that transformation. Its motivation is godly sorrow, a real sense of having harmed God by living life our own way. The end goal is to restore shalom, which means hoping and looking for reconciliation between God and others.

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- c. Why did God respond the way he did? What kind of response was he hoping to evoke? (Read Heb. 12: 5-11)

2. Parts 4 and 5: Read verses 32-64.

- a. What result does God's punishment have (vv. 32-37)?

- b. What reason does the psalmist give for God's choice not to destroy the Israelites? What does this show us about ourselves? What does it show us about God and the basis for our salvation (vv. 38-39)?

ENTERING YOUR STORY

A “Living Stone” Story

Joshua 4 tells a story in which the Israelites are instructed to gather stones from the riverbed God had dried up so they could cross it. It seems a little bizarre, but Joshua explains the following to his people: “In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever” (Josh. 4:6-7). Our stories are our memorials of what God has done for us. As we learn to collect and recollect them, our faith will grow. The following story is an example:

Many years ago a tragedy struck our church family. Our youth pastor’s wife had been badly burned in a grease fire. With burns covering 38 percent of her body, she lay like a bandaged mummy in the burn treatment center nearby; her hope for full recovery looked bleak. I was struggling with God over the situation, praying my childish criticisms. “If you are going to treat these two dear young servants like this, I quit! Why should I trust you when you let things like this happen? What kind of God are you?”

I was depressed and angry, but as a mother, I could not stay in my study sobbing all afternoon. I had to take my children to swim lessons at the local health club. I sat glumly at the edge of the pool, feet dangling in the water, staring into it hoping for clarity to come. A gentleman came and stood next to me, watching his grandson. He remarked, “Boy, I had a tough run tonight!” I looked toward him and found myself eye level with his right leg, which bore a ghastly scar beginning near his ankle and stretching up above his knee. The scarred leg stood in a running shoe elevated by a platform. I knew this man, and I knew his story well. Because I knew his story, I had the strange urge

to laugh at his complaint of a tough run. God had placed beside me a living stone.

Let me explain my seemingly cruel urge to laugh. This man was one of my husband's former patients. About five years before, early on a Sunday morning, my husband, an orthopedic surgeon, was called into a horrible trauma involving this man. A local pastor, he had arisen well before dawn to complete a training run for the New York marathon before he led multiple church services. He was running on a major highway and a drunk driver had crossed the road and struck him from behind. After seeing the pastor's wound, Kip feared the injury might end in amputation of the limb—the leg was shattered, and the wound was full of road rash that could easily lead to infection. The idea that this man might ever run again did not cross Kip's mind.

And there he stood next to me, wondering like any other runner why his run had been difficult that evening. God had so healed him that he hardly gave a thought to the devastation that this leg had endured some five years before. It was a living stone—in living color and flesh—a picture to me of what God can do when all seems hopeless.

Choose one of the topics below to reflect on how your story matters. Question 1 takes you through any story. Question 2 is focused on a "Living Stone" story.

1. Think of some stories in your life that seem confusing.
 - a. Without trying to explain them, write down what is confusing about them.

- c. Did God remind you of how he had rescued you in previous situations? If so, what was the reminder (some possibilities: a story, a visual reminder, a song)?

DAY 5

LIVING STORY

1. Review Psalm 78:32-37. About the repentance of the Israelites, Eugene Peterson says, “They didn’t mean a word of it; they lied through their teeth the whole time. They could not have cared less about him, wanted nothing to do with his Covenant” (MSG).

Repentance is not a decision of the will to do right instead of wrong. It’s an internal shift in our perceived source of life. Ultimately repentance is a humble broken return to God, but there’s a catch. We are utterly unable to do it. Repentance is not something we can decide to do and then do it; it’s something God works in us. Then what’s our part? Our part is getting ready for God to work repentance in us. Before God can turn us, we have to become deeply dissatisfied with the way things are now. That’s where we’re hungry for change and hopeful that change is possible.

—Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*

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2. Consider the following pitfalls of false repentance, then check the traps you have fallen into. Make notes about when you recall doing any of the following:

Feeling sorry about the consequences of your sin, but not the heart attitude underneath (being sorry you got caught, not sorry you did it).

Focusing on doing better and working harder.

Ignoring the heart attitude underlying the behavior—pride, self-righteousness, fear, or demandingness.

Asking someone to forgive you so you can feel better about yourself.

3. Below is a list of marks of true repentance. Pray about these, remembering times of turning that were characterized by these attitudes. Ask God to continue to grow you in a lifestyle of repentance.
- Overwhelmed by God's grace.
 - Humbled by the depths of demandingness in our own hearts.
 - Feeling sorrow that we have hurt another in our sin.
 - Knowing that only God can transform our hearts.
 - Turning away from the things that make our hearts feel safe, secure, and significant and instead trusting in God to provide those things.

PRAYING STORY

Choose one of the following options for praying the story of this chapter:

1. Write a prayer of thanksgiving, thanking God for some of the marvelous works he's done in your life.

The shortest road to repentance is remembrance. Let someone once recall what they used to be and reflect on what by God's grace they could be, and they will be led to repent, turning back from their sin to their Saviour.

—John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*

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2. Write a prayer of repentance, telling God how you have tried to make life work apart from him. Ask him to help you experience his mercy and forgiveness just as it is depicted in his kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of the Israelites.

- Review your memory verse. Think of a creative way to share it with someone.

Moving Forward

Psalm 78 is one of many places in Scripture that calls us to remember and rehearse God's story of grace within our own stories. We are urged to learn and recite our stories:

1. To turn away from a stubborn persistence in living life on our own terms (repent)
2. To trust in God to rescue and redeem this wrecked world because he has done so in the past
3. To hope in God in the present because of what he has already done and what he will do on the final day
4. To love others well by showing grace because we have received mercy and by telling the story that is the basis for our faith and hope

As we have seen, God's grand narrative is indeed a strange and wonderful story. In the next chapter, we will consider its implications for our lives.