

# His Stories—and Ours

## Using Stories to Teach the Story of Jesus

*by Ronald G. Davis*

As soon as the two disciples of Jesus realized what had happened to them on the road to Emmaus, they had to find those who would want to know “what had happened on the way” (Luke 24:35). History is simply the things done “on the way” to doing daily life. Every person is a part of history. Every person has a history.

Luke wanted to tell the story of Jesus, even as it was “handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:2). Luke wanted to tell the stories of Jesus—the most important personal history ever lived. And his Gospel reflects his high esteem for stories, or narratives, as the way to communicate the truth of history.

Any quick skimming of Luke’s Gospel in a Bible version that uses paragraph headings is a journey through an index of one narrative after another. Luke’s Gospel has more “stories”—that is, distinct narrative segments—than any other Gospel. In fact, about three-fourths of Luke’s Gospel is narrative. And much of the material that is not narrative appears in the context of a narrative, such as when Jesus discussed future events on the occasion of walking by the temple area with his disciples (Luke 21:5-36). From Luke 9:51 through 18:14 Luke relates twenty-one stories that the other Gospels do not include.

Such a concern with narrative helped Luke achieve his purpose for writing his Gospel: to establish “the certainty of the things [Theophilus had] been taught” (Luke 1:4). This concern for truth is seen in the Old Testament as well—from the events in Eden to the conflicts of Ezra and Nehemiah’s time. History reveals who God is and what his will is. History is truly “his story.”

### Stories and Wise Teachers

Let us consider how much teachers of adults can learn from others who have attempted to communicate the truth of God’s Word in story form.

While reading stories to adults may seem childish or out of place, this is a teaching method that can foster a wide range of learning opportunities for adults. Few learners of any age can resist listening to a good, well-told story. Reading aloud to adult students probably should seldom exceed 400 to 500 words, and it should not last any longer than four to five minutes. While our major source of stories for reading (or telling) is the Bible itself, we must not overlook the wealth of significant stories to be gleaned from non-biblical sources.

### “Read Me a Bible Story, Teacher”

All the stories of the Bible have been told and retold in print. Some of these endeavors have followed biblical texts closely, while others have used a well-informed imagination. (And some, of course, have used uninformed imaginations!) The “bare bones” nature of the biblical accounts is by the Holy Spirit’s design, so that (as John observed) we do not have to deal with an unmanageable collection of books (John 21:25).

Even stories published for children can provide ready instructional material for adults. Excellent compare-and-contrast activities and discussions can ensue. However, one must be cautious of any retellings that ignore or deny the inspirational, revelational nature of the contents of the Bible. At the same time, such retellings may offer useful insights into the thinking of those who consider biblical stories to be in the same category as myth and legend (and they will offer your students a strong reminder that there are those who hold such views and who seek to influence children through their writings).

Studies from Luke’s Gospel include some of the most familiar portions of Jesus’ life and ministry: the beautiful birth narratives, the parable of the prodigal son, Zaccheus’s unique encounter with Christ, and the dramatic events surrounding Jesus’ death and his resurrection from the dead. As was the case in Luke’s day, many have “taken in hand,” as Luke himself did (Luke 1:1), the pen of narration and applied it to these and other stories.

Every religious publisher that prepares materials for children will have a selection of usable titles. (Most churches have such books in their children’s classrooms.) And most public libraries, in the religious section for children, shelve many relevant titles. Although the diligent searcher will find other good choices, a few worthy titles from Luke follow.

Award-winning Christian writer Madeleine L’Engle prepared a series of stories on the life of Christ in *The Glorious Impossible* (Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1990). This includes a telling of “The Annunciation.”

The beautifully and authentically illustrated *The Blessing of the Lord* by Gary

D. Schmidt (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1997), with artwork by Dennis Nolan, includes stories on “The Centurion at Calvary” and “Anna, Simeon, and the Blessing Fulfilled.” Though these retellings are long, a teacher could use only selected portions for reading to the class.

One very popular series for children has been the Arch book collection from Concordia Publishing House. These versified retellings range from fair to excellent, but can be read quickly and with easy articulation and emphasis. Stories from the life and the parables of Jesus offer ready possibilities for use during a series from Luke’s Gospel. (And adults might also enjoy the illustrations, which are easy to show as the text is being read!)

Holiday House, Inc., a leading New York publisher for children, has published a variety of religious titles, such as, *He Is Risen: The Easter Story* by Elizabeth Winthrop (1985), with illustrations by the noted children’s artist Charles Mikolaycak. And popular children’s writer/illustrator Tomie dePaola has done some significant work for Holiday House, including *The Miracles of Jesus* and *The Parables of Jesus*.

It is always interesting to compare and contrast what human writers do with a biblical account with what the inspired writer has recorded. Sadly, several items are omitted even while non-biblical events are added. Even worse, some factual information is distorted and denied. Most adults, however, will gain much from discussing the differences and the possible reasons for them. When a writer violates cultural, historical, or geographical facts, one is right to question his motives—or at least his understanding. This, of course, demands that the teacher and the members of the class have a solid background in the cultural, historical, and geographical setting of the biblical narratives.

### “Read Me More Stories, Teacher”

Many other stories worthy of use in instructing adults can be drawn from non-biblical sources, both from the realms of fiction and non-fiction (especially biography). Tales from literature may help one illustrate the importance of standards of right and wrong, or, conversely, may highlight the contrasting worldview based on humanistic thinking. Even the well-known fables of Aesop can illustrate both, for not only is diligent effort touted as the secret to personal success (as in “The Ant and the Grasshopper”), but the “get-even” mentality is represented in “The Fox and the Stork,” with the usual concluding moral stated: “One bad turn deserves another.” (That’s quite the opposite of the behavior taught by Jesus in the “Golden Rule.”) And other fables from anonymous sources, such as “The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg,” illustrate

quite effectively the consequences of greed, which is one of the key issues of Jesus' parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 12.

Of course, there is a wealth of biographical material that is worthy of use by the teacher, especially incidents from the lives of the "saints." These include vivid accounts from the classic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (originally compiled by John Foxe) to more contemporary examples of godly lives, such as those of Corrie Ten Boom and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The hesitation of potential disciples in Luke 9:57-62 can certainly be brought to life using some of the incidents recorded in Foxe's collection or some of Solzhenitsyn's stories of life in a Siberian gulag.

Finally, the teacher of adults must not overlook the compelling stories that appear in the daily news. These accounts show how man's behavior has changed little from the first century to the twenty-first. Prodigal son (and prodigal daughter) stories abound, for sin still abounds. Reading such items to the class (keep them fairly short) and asking for the way(s) in which a story parallels biblical incidents will elicit both thought and insight—and this is exactly what the teacher of adults is after.

## The Teacher's "Library"

Every wise teacher of adults should constantly be "collecting" stories that may prove to be useful in instruction. Keeping an eye on coming lessons and coming lesson series will enable one to spot just the right stories. Those read to children and grandchildren, those found in devotional and leisure reading, those heard or seen in daily news reports—all have the potential to become effective instructional material.

Who can resist a good story? Almost no one. Jesus knew that, and so did his Father. What about you?