

Ministry Message



Celebrate the Ministry in Every Moment

More Than a Story

Getting Started

Before presenting this message, prepare large pictures to illustrate the well-known stories in the introduction. Print out a large image of Cinderella's glass slipper, a graphic of an arrow sticking to the center of a target (for "Robin Hood"), a photo of Spider-Man's mask.

Alternatively, you can choose any stories that will be recognizable to your group and use other simple pictures that will help them to guess. You will also need a picture of a cross and a mirror, ideally about the size of the other pictures you will use.

Note: Feel free to have the images you use available on a tablet or other screen instead of printing them out—just be sure they're easy for you to find and for the group to see!

Introduction

Story time! (*Gather the group around you and encourage them to make themselves comfortable.*) That's right, I'm going to tell you a story, just like in first grade. But first, let's see if you can guess what that story will be. (*Hold up the glass slipper picture and allow them to guess "Cinderella."*) Okay, maybe that was too easy. How about this one? (*Hold up the arrow and bull's-eye picture and allow them to guess "Robin Hood."*) This one? (*Repeat with the Spider-Man cue.*) Man, you guys are good.

Okay, who can tell me what this story is? (*Hold up the picture of a cross. Allow participants to guess "Jesus," "Christ's death on the cross," "salvation," and so on.*)

Getting to the Heart

I think some of you might know this one, too. It begins like this, "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, people were sinful."

Except, of course, that's not right. It wasn't once upon a time; it's right now. It wasn't far, far away. It is right here. It is in us. People *are* sinful. You, me, all the prophets and evangelists who wrote the Bible, your parents, your heroes—every human being does or says or thinks things that take us further and further away from God. And this is not just an "Aww, shucks" kind of problem. Disobeying God's Law shuts us off from God and from all that is good, for now and forever. Sin brings eternal darkness, permanent death, no hope.

But here's a truth about God: he loves us—*really* loves us. He wouldn't just accept the fact that our sin cut us off from him. Instead, he sent a Savior, his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be born as a human being. Jesus was true God. He never stopped being God. But he became a true human being, a human being just like us. Think about that, and not just as a concept: the reality of being human means sometimes aching with hunger and sometimes feeling exhausted and daily needing to wash between your toes. It's not all that pretty.

When Jesus grew up, his story got even more real and even less pretty. Although throughout his life Jesus obeyed God's Law perfectly, he was betrayed and sentenced to death by crucifixion. God's perfect Son was really and truly nailed to a cross and hung up to die, cut off from hope. Jesus endured exactly the punishment we should have endured, except Jesus didn't deserve it. He did it all because of love, love for us.

Jesus took all our sin upon himself—the God-spiting things we've done or are doing or will do someday—and *deleted* it. All the backups, all the secret extra copies on the hard drive, the entire internet history? *Deleted*. Thanks to Jesus, all our sin is gone. God has forgotten it completely. In Jesus, we are truly forgiven, forever.

All right, one more story to guess. Let's see if you know what this one is. (*Hold up the mirror and slowly turn it to face each participant.*)

You might not have thought about it this way, but *this* story—your story, the story happening in your life right now—is the *sequel* to the story of Christ's death on the cross. You get to live the way you do because Jesus did what he did. All of the peace you have in knowing you're forgiven . . . all the hope you have in knowing God's promise of eternal life . . . all the joy that you have in knowing you are free . . . these things are possible only because Jesus took your punishment upon himself and then defeated death once and for all!

The Bible tells us, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). That's more than a story—that's a plot-twisting, life-changing, heart-transforming reality.

Uh oh, *what now*, right? I mean, Jesus' story is now *our* story? Does that feel a little like suddenly being made director of the next *Star Wars* movie to anyone else? No pressure!

Well, this is another amazing truth about our nonfictional God: He didn't just hand over some notes and jet off to retire in the Cayman Islands. He is still with you, right beside you as you live your story. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." When you're confused or lost or in trouble or lonely, he's here in his Word to guide, comfort, and cherish you. Not only did he make your story—your life—possible, he is sticking around to make it richer and full of joy!

Taking It Home (to use with the Crown of Thorns bracelet)

I'm going to give you something now, and I want everyone to put it on. (*Hand out a More Than a Story Crown of Thorns bracelet to each person and wait while everyone opens them.*) Do you see the thorns? Take one out and tie it on your bracelet. As you do that, think about the story—the more-than-a-story—of Jesus' love for us, love that led him to give up his life in our place. And I want you come up with one thing (you don't have to tell anyone!) to do or say or think or pray this week so that his story shines through your life. When you see the thorn on your wrist, it will be a reminder.

Every week as we get closer to Easter, take a moment to tie on a thorn and make a goal. It can be the same goal every week—no one is getting tested on this! But let this activity and the constant cue of your bracelet make you more aware that, thanks to the sacrifice Jesus made, we are able to live our own stories—with Jesus—in perfect peace with God!

Taking It Home (to use with any other gifts)

So, "Once upon a time" . . .? Well, Christ did really die in our place *once*—for *all* time. I'm going to give you something now that will help you remember the powerful reality of this. (*Hand out the gift you brought to hand out.*) Because of the sacrifice Jesus made, we are able to live our own stories—with Jesus—in perfect peace with God!